

# THE ANNOTATED EDITOR

BY BRUCE ANDERSON\*

The following is from the Santa Rosa Press Democrat (California) of Sunday, December 12, 1999. It is called 'Keeping News, Opinion Separate', and was signed by Pete Golis, the Press Democrat's Chief Editor.

The PLAIN TYPE is the work of Mr. Golis. The ITALICIZED comments, elucidations, deconstructions and random bits of scholarly insight (in parenthesis) are mine. I offer this guide to the thought processes of the editor of the North Coast's dominant media as a public service.

"When the year (1999) began, the writers who share this Editorial Notebook decided we would devote an occasional column to the workings of the editorial pages. Assistant Editorial Director Marilyn Duck has written about how we choose local and syndicated commentaries...

(She applies the [David] Broder Standard: the column must be a statement of the obvious, blandly delivered and must fall within the Democrat/Republican parameters of received opinion.)

...Editorial Page Editor Paul Gullixson has described the wonderful world of Letters to the Editor, and provided Gullixson's Top-10 list of how to make sure your letter is published.

(200 words of corporo-prose. Any letter emitting signs of life are culled. All letters are printed at least a week after the opinion or news item that provoked them, if they aren't tossed on the grounds of bad taste, assuring that most readers will have no idea of what Letters to the Editors refer to.)

My job today is to explain the Editorial Board and its role in maintaining a fire wall between News and Opinion.

(What's sad about this statement is Golis is obviously stupid enough to believe it.)

The first thing to be said is that the reporters and editors who work in the newsroom want you to know that they're not to blame for what happens on the newspaper's opinion pages.

(But they don't dare make an issue of it or they're out the door.)

That responsibility belongs to the people who write and edit the daily editorial pages and the Sunday Forum section.

(And a sorrier crew of semi-illiterate, denatured hacks ever dominated an American newspaper.)

We are separate and independent by design...

(The design of the New York Times.)

...The New York Times Co., which owns the Press Democrat, insists that its newspapers maintain stand-alone departments for Opinion and News — each with its own budget and each reporting directly to the publisher.

(The bottom line is, after all, the bottom line.)

The five people who produce the Opinion pages occupy a humble warren of the third floor, while the 100 or so editors, reporters, artists, photographers, researchers and editorial assistants who produce the daily news pages occupy quarters on the second floor.

(Golly, they probably wouldn't recognize each other if they met on the elevator. The whole show is headquartered in a bunker-like building in the dying heart of Santa Rosa where it's protected by an elevator pass system presided over by a minimum wage lass sitting in a plexiglass pillbox in the lobby.)

Opinion writers do not see news stories before they appear in the newspaper. News editors and reporters don't see opinion pieces, or even know the topics, before their publication.

(The born slut doesn't need anatomy lessons.)

We don't share press releases or phone calls or interviews. We maintain separate schedules of meetings with candidates and newsmakers. When people come to the newspaper, they meet with one department and then the other.

(Which are interchangeably suburban, white, dull-normal, anxious to remain employed, trained by the 'AP Style Book'.)

To an outsider, this may sound like unnecessary effort, but it's important to us.

(Frankly, Pete, no one gives a shit, and those who do know it isn't true.)

As it does at every major newspaper, this fire wall ensures that judgments about news remain independent of the opinions of the newspaper's editorial board.

(Almost all your "news" is pulled from the wire services. The Press Democrat, enormous staff notwithstanding, does very little reporting and much of the reporting it does is inaccurate and always edited to reflect the neo-fascist views of Santa Rosa's dominant business interests.)

Newspaper people aren't under the illusion that this separation will persuade every reader of the independence of the two departments. Anytime people don't like something they read, they will find an ulterior motive.

(Actually, most people aren't as stupid as you assume they are. They understand that newspapers are businesses dependent on advertising revenues. If the daily Press Democrat production makes the businesses unhappy, the newspaper is out of the free enterprise news game; hence the Press Democrat.)

But we will keep operating the same way because we think this arrangement works and because newspaper people have a certain old-fashioned sense of right and wrong.

(Please. You will keep operating as you are because you send big annual profits back to the New York Times mother-ship. As for the morality of newspaper people, especially you and the rest of the sad sacks holed up in the Mendocino Ave. bagnio, Bill Clinton looks like John of the Cross.)

We also love opinions, and we think they deserve a place in the newspaper.

(Excuse me, Pete, but have you been drinking?)

We get letters, for example. More than 5,000 Letters to the Editor will cross our desks this year.

(Fascinating stuff here, Pete, a regular journalo-mother lode of breakthrough info.)

We receive hundreds of locally written commentaries, published under the banner of 'Close to Home'. Consider the issues ventilated here just in recent weeks — the high cost of living for seniors, holiday customs, school shootings and the over-worked family, press coverage of the World Trade Organization, the need for help for Alzheimer's patients, the daycare crisis, Thanksgiving in France, a pro and con on transportation



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taxes, creating park for hikers, a pro and con plus other commentaries on vineyard expansion, a Veterans' Day appreciation, the public library and Internet fillers. And more.

(Did you say you ventilate over-shot French school families on Alzheimer's Day?)

We publish the best syndicated columns and cartoons we can find — the unabashed liberalism of Molly Ivins, Maureen Dowd's wicked profiles, religious conservatism of Cal Thomas, David Broder on national politics, Ellen Goodman and George Will, Thomas Friedman and Trudy Rubin of foreign policy, Leonard Pitts on real people, Peter King on the real California, Dan Walters on state politics.

(Wonderful, wonderful. Unabashed canned opinion from far far away. Beats talking pavement, water and methyl bromide. The range of opinion here is mainstream candyass lib to neo-fascist.)

And we write editorials.

(And I don't hesitate to tell you, Pete, that no newspaper in America produces, day to day, a more fatuous, a dumber collection of clunkers than you and your cretinous assistants.)

Don't tell anybody, but it's a really cool job.

(It's safe with me, guy.)

Every morning we sit around reading newspapers (Press Democrat, S.F. Chronicle, N.Y. Times, L.A. Times, Wall Street Journal, Sacramento Bee, San Jose Mercury-News). We comb the wire, check CNN, surf the net.

(Gibberish in, gibberish out.)

The Editorial Board — the publisher, three editorial writers and the section editor — convenes around 9:45 a.m.

(And we're outta here by 10 a.m.)

We exchange ideas, and writers are assigned to assimilate the Board's comments into the next day's editorials. We debate the relative merits of the latest local and syndicated commentaries; we decide if more space is needed for Letters to the Editor; we review cartoons; and we talk about plans for Sunday Forum.

And we get paid for this.

(Yep, it's ridiculous, isn't it?)

What a scam.

(You said it, Pete, I didn't.)

We do not escape criticism. Nor should we. It's part of our job description to promote and publish letters and commentaries with different points of view, especially opinion pieces that

take exception to an editorial. Because we are crazy newspaper people, we like doing this.

(O you're a wild and crazy bunch down there in the Mendo Ave. bunker! Does Gaye do the can-can at your alcohol-free Christmas Party?)

By popular acclaim, our editorials are (a) too liberal, and (b) too conservative.

And the fellow who says we are too liberal could never imagine anyone thinking we're too conservative.

(Hate to break it to you, Mr. Golis, but the five people who read your editorials simply think you're a moron, and each time you sit down at your word processor you confirm our opinion.)

And vice-versa.

(You really shouldn't write when you're loaded. This is painful, Pete.)

When readers don't like something we do, where do they most often place the blame?

(On the madam, not you girls in the \$5 cribs.)

That's easy. It's the interlopers from the mothership in New York who order us to be too conservative, too liberal and too whatever.

(So long as you make your annual quotas, Mother Big Apple could care less what its outback papers do.)

When this comes up, I try to explain that we screw up all by ourselves.

(No! Not you, Pete!)

I've never discussed editorials with anyone from New York, I say, and since I first arrived in Sonoma County in 1947, I probably don't qualify as a carpetbagger.

(You'll do as a carpet though. Besides which, why would anybody in New York want to talk to you?)

This seems to placate people until the next time those bad people from New York order us to commit some horrible offense.

(O Pete, your irony is just too, too rich.)

As the person with the final responsibility for what appears on the editorial pages, I think it's fair to say this is a newspaper with a moderate to liberal editorial policy. We support more spending for schools, parks, affordable housing and social programs. We tend to recommend Democratic candidates (in part because Republicans have a hard time fielding qualified candidates in an area with large Democratic majorities). We support urban growth boundaries, the open space tax and transit — which impresses environmentalists. We favor freeway widening — which does not.

(Bold stands, every one of them! I want you to know that I am standing at attention in my kitchen in silent tribute to the lion-like stance you've taken here.)

So it goes.

(Nobody ever said being chickenshit was a walk in the park.)

Most of all, we want our pages to be fresh, provocative, informative and full of diverse opinions. And on the days in which we fall, we want to keep on trying.

(Well, by my reckoning, you've failed for 5,678 consecutive days, but I admire your persistence.)

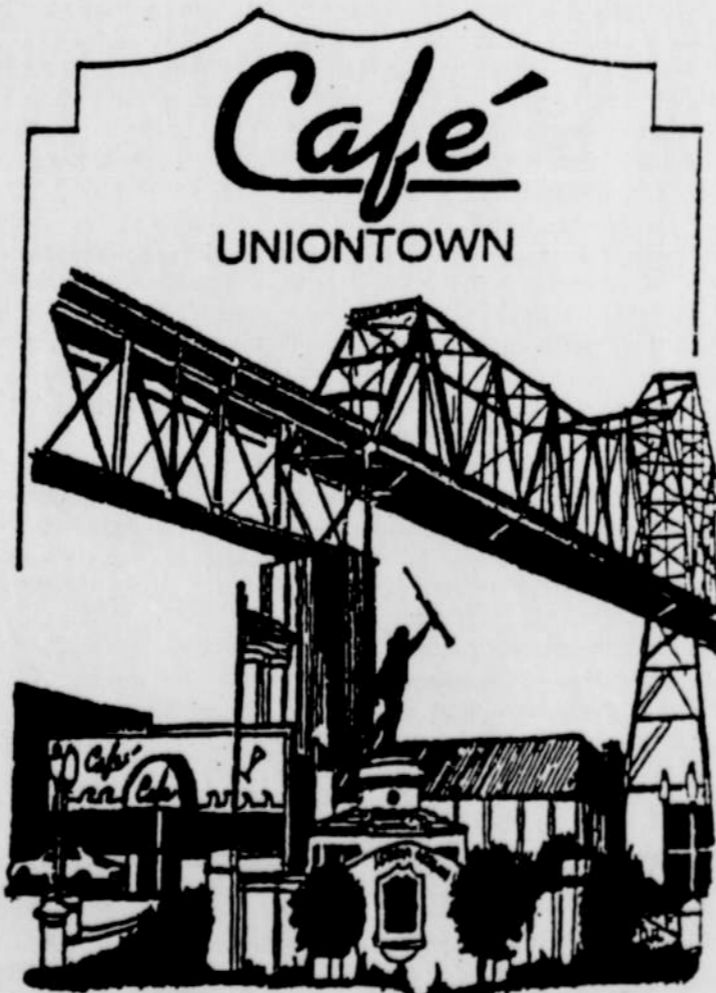
I'm proud of the people who work on these pages, in part because they do so much with fewer people and fewer resources than you find at larger newspapers.

(This is all very, very sad, Pete. I think you should have kept it to yourself rather than reveal the depths of your depravity like this. The great newspapers are long gone, as are the great journalists. It's sad that the great legacy of a free press for a free people is now in your hands. May you spend eternity locked in a small room with nothing to read but the Press Democrat.)

Let me know what you think. My direct line is 526-8651. Email: pgolis@pressdemocrat.com. Fax: 521-5305.

(I think you're a very limited person, Pete, but just right for your job.)

I promise to report back what I learn, even if you blame those terrible people from New York.\*\*



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\*Bruce Anderson is the editor and publisher of the famous 'Anderson Valley Advertiser' published in Boonville, California, from which this article is reprinted.

\*\*Among those terrible persons from New York is former Oregonian reporter Bill Keller, now managing editor of the N.Y. Times.