



Who's Writing the 'Local' Opinions?

CHANGES IN *THE REGISTER-GUARD'S* EDITORIAL SECTION

By Taylor Griggs

When national newspaper publishing chain GateHouse Media bought *The Register-Guard* in February 2018, some of the most notable changes happened in the editorial section.

Jackman Wilson was the editorial page editor at the time; he recounts the changes made to the *RG's* editorial section after the GateHouse acquisition.

He says new editor Alison Bath's "first significant change in the editorial department, effective Sept. 1, was to reduce the number of opinion pages by half: No more four-page Sunday Commentary section, no more daily op-ed pages."

Wilson writes to *Eugene Weekly* in an email that while it isn't particularly damning for a specific newspaper to lose parts of their opinion section in this new news era, some of the changes that were made confirmed his decision to leave the paper.

"This move came as no great surprise," he says. "It's rare to find a newspaper of any size with 16 ad-free opinion pages every week. The cut-down to eight, however, solidified my decision to depart. It was becoming clear that I belonged to an era that was coming to an end, and I had no interest in being associated with the new one."

After Wilson left, his editorial colleagues Christian Wihtol and Bob Welch left, too.

"Overnight, the institutional memory of the *RG* editorial department went from three-quarters of a century to three days," Wilson says.

According to Shanna Cannon, the *RG's* publisher, the paper's editorial board is made up of herself, *RG* Editor-in-Chief Bath and associate editor Anna Glavash. Cannon said in a May email to *EW* that the *RG* is still "actively recruiting and interviewing for an Opinion Editor."

This spot has been vacant since Wilson left.

"We have a job posting for our Opinion Page Editor and filling that position is a priority," Cannon also wrote to *EW* in October, shortly after Wilson's departure.

"Bath and the *RG* are still looking for an editorial page editor. An editorial page without an editor will unavoidably be rudderless," Wilson says.

Wilson, who had been on staff at the *RG* since 1985 before his 2018 departure, has a wealth of editorial writing experience, including, he says, writing for Opinion in a Pinch, a Portland-based company that writes editorials and opinion columns for papers in need — that is, lacking in the editorial staff to produce necessary work.

He has not done work for Opinion in a Pinch for the *RG*, he says.

Since the GateHouse acquisition resulted in a significant cutback in editorial staff at the *RG*, there has been speculation about Eugene's newspaper being one of those papers in need. *EW* has been one of those speculators, questioning who is behind the "Our View" editorials, now that the only person listed on the editorial section of the paper's "contact us" page is Glavash. Bath and Cannon are listed on the opinion page itself.

Glavash denied *EW's* interview request because she "can't answer questions on behalf of the paper." She is, according to Wilson, who hired her, a "quick study with a good feel for the

work." But even so, he says he thinks it would be difficult for just one person to do this work.

"I cannot independently confirm that the *RG* is outsourcing editorials. I doubt, however, that Bath or Glavash are writing all, or even most, of them," Wilson writes.

Christian Trejbal is the CEO of Opinion in a Pinch. He declined an interview for this story, saying he has nothing to add to previous emails to *EW* where he said that he couldn't discuss specifics of his client list.

Dick Hughes, who is a writer with Opinion in a Pinch and the former editorial page editor of the *Salem Statesman Journal*, also declined an interview request.

However, several local politicians who did endorsement interviews in fall 2018 with the *RG* confirmed to *EW* that Trejbal or others participated in their interviews over the phone, in addition to the presence of Bath, Cannon and Glavash.

The most recent comments from Trejbal about his opinion writing business are from 2015. A notable piece of journalism on the subject was written by Deron Lee for the *Columbia Journalism Review* in October 2015, more than two years before the *RG* lost its editorial staff.

A main issue of outsourcing editorial writing to companies like Opinion in a Pinch is the fact that these writers do not typically belong to the communities they write their editorials for. News editorials typically ponder and weigh in on issues the paper reports on and that affect the community.

"Trejbal says it's simply a matter of doing internet research on the issues at hand, and sometimes calling local officials to get the lowdown," Lee's article for *CJR* says.

This is inadequate for former *RG* editorial staffers such as Wilson.

"Heavy, or exclusive, reliance on such a service entails some serious problems. Obviously, the editorials would be written by people with little or no direct knowledge of the community or readership. No matter how strong an outside contractors' researching and writing skills may be, a feel for the community is indispensable," Wilson writes.

Paul Neville is a former associate editorial editor for *The Register-Guard*. He shares many of Wilson's opinions on the importance of local knowledge for editorial writers.

"By the time I came on as associate editor I had a lot of experience in the community, at the newspaper, covering a range of beats," Neville says. "That used to be the way they promoted somebody to the editorial board."

"From time to time I've had the impression that an editorial was conceived and written by people who might just as well have arrived in Eugene yesterday," Wilson says.

"It's really important that editorial writers have that sense of community and that sense of institutional history," Neville says. "Every day we'd have an hour-long meeting where we'd talk about the editorials coming up. It was a process that farming editorials out doesn't provide for."

But, Neville mentions, some editorial content is better than nothing.

"Even editorials [for *The Register-Guard*] written by people in Portland are better than no editorials at all." ■

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