

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Online comments continue

The Oregonian, Oregon's largest newspaper, announced this week that as of Jan. 2 its website, OregonLive, will stop accepting and posting reader comments.

This isn't shocking — many newspapers, of varying sizes, have eliminated reader comments from their websites over the past several years.

The Baker City Herald is not on that list.

Nor do I expect that it will be any time soon.

Which is not to say I don't understand the issues that Oregonian officials cited in an editorial announcing the paper's decision to get rid of its commenting feature.

These include a relatively small percentage of people posting a majority of the comments, and a lack of civility among the online discussions.

The latter, in particular, will sound familiar to anyone who has given more than a cursory glance to such forums.

Ideally, offering people a chance to post comments enriches websites, stimulates discussion and debate and gives readers perspectives they wouldn't otherwise have.

Indeed I believe that happens.

But I can hardly pretend that the benefits aren't sometimes overwhelmed, at least based solely on volume, by ad hominem attacks and tangential comments that devolve into exchanges, often between two or three people, which have little if anything to do with the article, editorial or column to which the comments are attached. And the anonymity afforded to online commentators contributes to the coarseness.

These problems have plagued the Herald's website at times.

And I empathize with The Oregonian's lament that moderating comments to weed out the more egregious offenders "takes time and resources that are better spent producing independent local news."

That's a far greater challenge for The Oregonian, which measures comments in the thousands, than for the Baker City Herald.

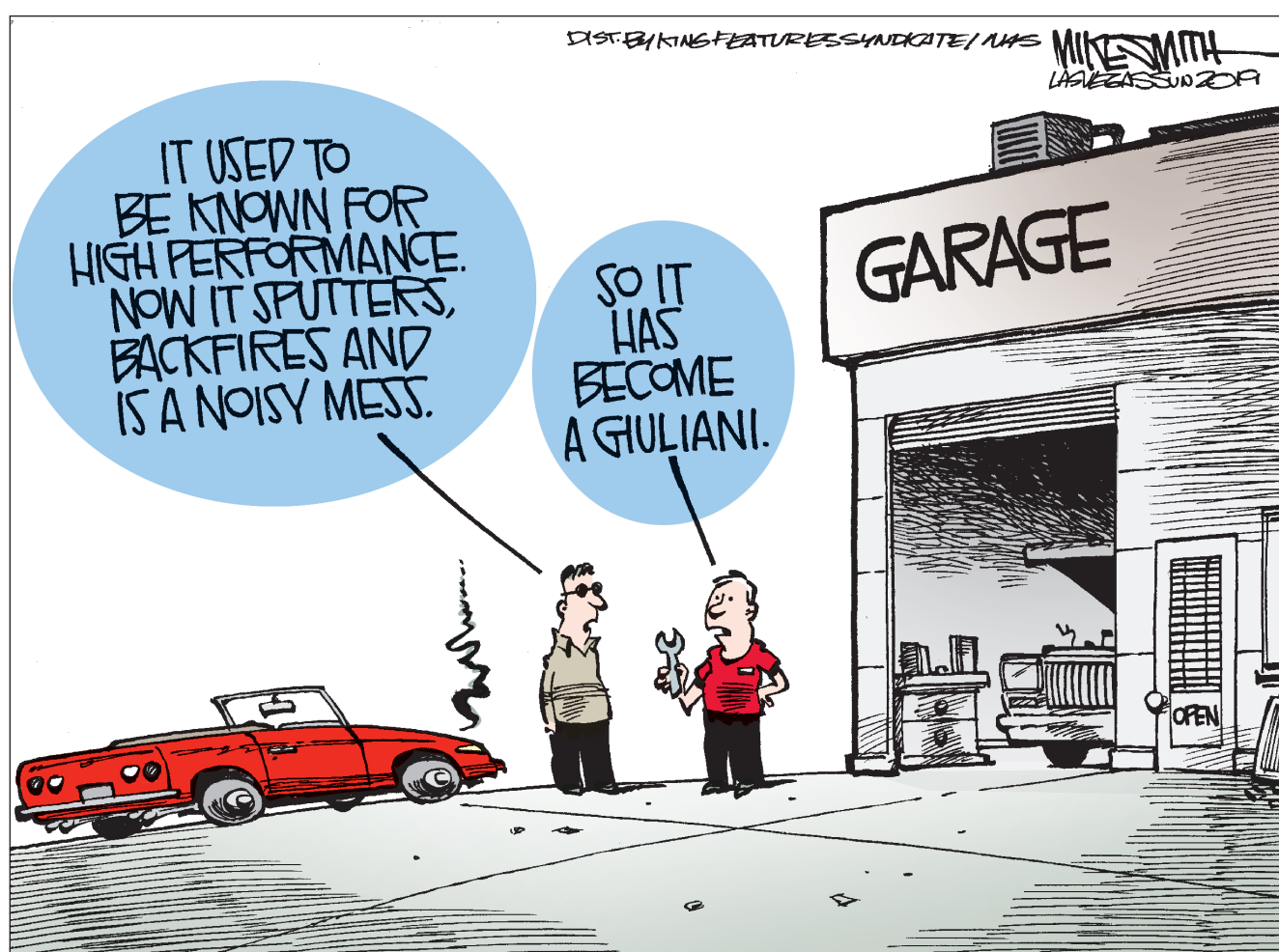
But on balance I believe that continuing to accept and to publish comments on our website gives our subscribers something of value. And so long as I think so, I feel compelled to keep the commenting option.

Websites are ubiquitous, of course, but I remember before the Herald's site debuted in 2001, an era when readers' ability to engage with the newspaper, and with each other, was limited to submitting letters to the editor.

That's still the format I prefer, mainly because letters, unlike online comments, are preserved in ink on paper — what I consider the "real newspaper" rather than the version rendered in pixels. Letter writers don't have the option of anonymity, either.

Yet comments, as I mentioned, help to make the Herald the marketplace of information and opinions that it has been for 150 years. Notwithstanding the chaff that comes along with the harvest of ideas, I don't want to deprive our readers of the nutritious kernels that sift out.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Making sure you get your newspaper in a timely way

Happy New Year! The calendar has taken another faithful leap from the end of one year to the beginning of another and hopes are running high. January is often prime time for personal and professional reflection on the past 12 months and preparation for the future. It's also a month of resolutions and improvement plans. We wipe the slate clean from the challenges and disappointments of the previous year and begin laying the foundation for a more successful and promising year ahead with anticipation. It's a month of transition and change. If my newspaper career has taught me anything, it's that change is inevitable — and necessary — but there will be bumps along the way.

Brace yourselves, loyal readers, as we embark together on yet another exciting adventure in newspapering.

One of my key initiatives for 2020 was to evaluate our customer service, including how to provide more reliable in-home delivery to subscribers and a better overall product. So much of the last few years of our operation and the decisions we made were based purely on survival tactics. It's refreshing to be able to refocus our attention and energy into rebuilding our brand and reconnecting with our readers and communities. Adding more value to your subscription and providing you the best product and service possible is once again our top priority.

Without a doubt, the most challenging facet of our business is delivery. The simple act of getting your newspaper from our office to your front door sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? But it's a job that has proven to be more difficult with each passing year. Finding and maintaining a carrier force has become a daily struggle and a trend we haven't been able to buck. Our ability to provide consistent delivery to our subscribers is in constant jeopardy. It's an exhausting cycle.

You might not know that your carrier isn't an employee of The Observer or the Baker City Herald. They're contracted haulers and self employed. Gone are the days of the beloved "paper route kid." Our carrier force is



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made up primarily of retired folks and workers who aren't looking for full-time employment but rather as a way to supplement their income. Delivery of our product is a vital aspect of our operation. What good is a breaking news story, a compelling photo or an advertising campaign if it doesn't reach the homes of our readers? A shortage of carriers and recruitment challenges have forced the office staff at both newspapers to pitch in and deliver "down routes." There's been more than one occasion in which myself, reporters and advertising staff have delivered newspapers. I am fortunate our office culture has a "all hands on deck" mentality. While it's a nice change of scenery for those of us who are chained to a desk most days, it's not a model that can sustain itself too long.

And here's where our adventure begins.

Beginning Tuesday, Feb. 4, The Observer and the Baker City Herald will convert our delivery method from contracted carrier to same day US Postal Service mail delivery. At the same time, we're going to shift our publishing days to Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Shifting publishing days allows readers the advantage of receiving their coveted grocery sales ads on the day the sales start, expands our late-breaking news opportunity and puts us in a position to provide Friday night sports coverage and scores in our Saturday editions. It also sets the stage for getting your newspaper to the post office in time for same-day delivery by mail. A partnership with the USPS allows us to hand off the delivery of our product to the experts, freeing up my staff to do what they do best — reporting on local news and events and helping promote and market businesses in our communities.

Shifting our publication days and moving from afternoon carrier delivery to same-day delivery via postal

carrier is a natural and industry wide solution to delivery challenges and gives us the ability to fix inconsistencies. This is not a cost-cutting measure. There are no savings with this switch. It's a decision based purely on our desire to ensure our valuable subscribers get the newspaper delivered to them, three days a week, on a consistent and predictable schedule they can rely on and with the most vetted, accurate, up-to-date local news coverage and advertising we can provide.

The conversion to mail distribution does mean the end of an era for our newspapers in terms of our delivery force. After nearly 125 years for The Observer and 150 years for the Baker City Herald, the last carrier delivered newspaper will hit your doorstep on Jan. 31. Our dedicated carriers waged war against unpredictable weather, late press times, aggressive dogs and disgruntled subscribers. It's a difficult and often thankless gig — even under the most ideal of circumstances. And rarely are the circumstances ideal.

There are few words that can express the gratitude we have for our carriers, past and present. They are truly the unsung heroes of our operation and although we think that partnering for postal delivery is the right business decision to make, it is not easy to say goodbye to our delivery partners. I hope in the coming days and weeks as we transition our delivery that you will take a few minutes to visit with your carrier and to thank them for their service.

The foundation of a successful newspaper hinges on its commitment to its readers and customers. It's my sincere hope our readers will embrace and appreciate these changes as inherently positive transitions in which The Observer and Baker City Herald fulfill our promise of providing the best product and delivery service possible — not just for the short-term, but in a way that is sustainable long into our future.

Karrine Brogotti is the publisher of the Baker City Herald and The Observer in La Grande.

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Donald Trump: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1414; fax 202-456-2461; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov/contact.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Pendleton office: 310 S.E. Second St. Suite 105, Pendleton 97801; 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (2nd District): D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; walden.house.gov.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR

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Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-301, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. District office: P.O. Box 1027, Ontario, OR 97914; 541-889-8866.

State Rep. Lynn Findley (R-Vale): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep. LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Mike Downing, Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe, Lynette Perry,

Arvid Andersen, Ken Gross and Doni Bruland.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Ray Duman, police chief; John Clark, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefania Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.