

Current issues regarding letters to the editor.

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*Paper presented to the National Newspaper Association convention,
Co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at
Kansas State University and the NNA Foundation
“Reaching real-world readers,” Thursday, Sept. 29, 2005, Milwaukee, Wis.*

ABSTRACT: This paper provides an overview of three peer-reviewed research articles that investigate various aspects of letters to the editor in U.S. newspapers. Specifically, the paper includes findings from a national survey that outlines the types of people who are most likely to write letters to the editor; a discussion of the practical and ethical implications of “no unsigned letters” policies; and findings from a content analysis regarding the scope of the “astroturf” phenomenon, the practice of downloading ready-made letters from the Web sites of special-interest groups, signing their names, and submitting them as original letters.

Introduction

Nearly all newspapers in America will publish letters from readers. Even newspapers with vestigial editorial pages filled with canned copy and low-rate syndicated columns will still at least offer space for letters (though it’s no surprise that such pages get few, if any, meaningful letters). More importantly, many community newspapers for which the editorial page is the soul of the paper will devote considerable time, effort, and resources to cultivate and maintain a healthy and robust letters section. Those letters sections are used in many different ways by both writers and editors. Writers use the forums to participate

in public discourse, to promote their views and causes, to complain about or heap praise on the work of newspapers, and many times just to vent some steam. Journalists use the letters to get reader feedback on the job they do, to get a pulse of what issues matter most to readers, to give readers a sense of inclusion in the newspaper production, and sometimes to even make editorial decisions.¹

It's with those devoted newspapers in mind that I have pursued several different studies related to "LTE's," from studies about who writes letters to inquiry into how and why journalists select letters for publication. This paper is a summary of that research, and I hope the findings will be useful to newspaper editors who are committed to their LTE sections.

Many of the findings in that research have reinforced many assumptions journalists have about LTEs and have supported the findings of research conducted throughout the 20th century. Specifically, the findings suggest that letters editors view their LTE forums as important community service tools, as important forums for democratic discourse; at the same time, editors acknowledge that LTE's are not always good representations of public opinion, although they like to believe that their LTE sections are forums for diverse opinions from the community.² Some newspapers have experimented with changes to how they manage and present LTEs, but most of those changes have been minor — providing a bit more space, a bit more editing, more but shorter

¹ Ernest Hynds, "Editorial Page Editors Discuss Use of Letters," *Newspaper Research Journal* 13 (Winter-Spring, 1992): 124-136; David Pritchard and Dan Berkowitz, "How Readers' Letters May Influence Editors and News Emphasis: A Content Analysis of 10 Newspapers, 1948-1978," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 68 (Autumn 1991): 388-395; Suraj Kapoor, and Carl Botan, "Studies Compare How Editors Use Letters," *The Masthead* 44 (Spring 1992)

² Steve Pasternak, "Editors and the Risk of Libel in Letters," *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (Summer 1983): 311-315, 328; Paula C. Renfro, "Bias in Selection of Letters to the Editor," *Journalism Quarterly* 56 (Winter 1979): 822-826; Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "Letters to the Editor as a Forum for Public Deliberation: Modes of Publicity and Democratic Debate," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (September 2001): 303-320. David L. Grey and Trevor R. Brown, "Letters to the Editor: Hazy Reflections of Public Opinion," *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Autumn 1970): 450-456-471.

letters published each day, special forums for letters on specific topics, etc. None of that is revolutionary, and the few attempts that truly are revolutionary — such as giving up space for staff editorials and columnists to letter writers, which a few papers tried in the 1990s — have not led to widespread reform. But while LTE forums have changed little since the mid-20th century, the world discussed in those letters has changed considerably. Newspaper readership patterns have changed, attitudes about public discourse have changed, and the role of LTEs in professional campaigns has become more solidified and more complex. Talk radio and Web-based forums provide alternative outlets for public discourse, leaving editors to wonder whose voices they are “losing” from their LTE forums. Meanwhile, the Internet has added a whole new dimension to the letter-writing campaign, providing people with high-tech tools to spread prepared statements and make them look like home-grown letters from readers.

The research findings summarized below are intended to help editors to consider those changes as they continue the “holy work” of providing forums for public discourse. In summary, those findings indicate that:

- The most likely letter writers are over age 45, have incomes above \$40,000, and have attended college.
- Among those who have not written letters, 35.1 percent said they would send letters if their names would not be published. Women, city-dwellers, people aged 18 to 44, and racial minorities all were more willing to write letters if their names would be withheld.
- The ethical arguments editors use to justify “must sign” letters policies contradict established ethical tenets and procedures, specifically: they ignore facts about the historical role of anonymous speech in American democracy; they do not thoroughly apply ethical principles such as fairness, balance, and giving

“voice to the voiceless;” and they allow personal biases against anonymity to affect professional decisions.

- About a third of special-interest Web sites that encourage supporters to write LTEs provide text for would-be letter-writers that can be copied and incorporated into letters, a practice journalists call “astroturf.” Most of such groups, however, encourage supporters to write letters to the editor by following the guidelines newspaper editors now provide, such as length limitations, authorship requirements, civility, and the like.

Who writes?

In 2003, we conducted a national telephone survey of just over 1,000 American adults and asked them about their letter-writing habits.³ The survey was inspired by earlier, limited attempts by scholars to discern the demographics of average letter writers, which had suggested that most letter writers have above-average incomes and education levels, are middle-aged or older, and tend to be politically or ideologically conservative.⁴ The problems with those earlier studies is that they focused on limited geographic regions and only counted people whose letters had been published — in essence, the “sample” for those studies was highly localized (in some cases, just a single town was studied) and was affected by the subjective selection criteria of just a few letters editors. We wanted to overcome those limitations by drawing a national sample and by including people who may have written letters but had not had them published.

We started with a premise that there are three distinct stages in the life of a letter to the editor: authorship, selection and publication. Past research had focused on the latter two stages — how editors select letters, and (as mentioned

³ See Bill Reader, Guido H. Stempel III, and Douglass K. Daniel, “Age, Wealth, Income Predict Letters to Editor,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, 4 (Fall 2004).

⁴ Sidney Forsythe, “An Exploratory Study of Letters to the Editor and Their Contributors,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1950): 143-44; William D. Tarrant, “Who Writes Letters to the Editor?” *Journalism Quarterly* 34 (Fall 1957): 501-502; Gary L. Vacin, “A Study of Letter Writers,” *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Autumn 1965): 464-465.

earlier) the demographics of those who have had letters published. We argued that the greatest limitation on earlier “who writes” studies was, by far, the second stage, since the selection process involves so many different variables (such as letter length, topic, the news of the day, restrictions on “thank you” and other specific forms of letters, even editors’ mood shifts from hour to hour).

Compounding those variables are the individualistic and institutional preferences of each editor and each newspaper — some are fairly libertarian in their approaches, allowing many different views (including controversial views) to be published, while others may be fairly conservative, restricting letters to only certain topics and blocking certain viewpoints. (For example, a newspaper I worked for early in my career would not publish, on direction of the publisher and the executive editor, letters that criticized the newspaper). In essence, a “who writes” study based on actual letters written would have to begin with a collection of all the letters submitted to a large number of newspapers, including the letters that were not published, and then contacting all of those writers. For obvious reasons, such an approach would not be feasible, and even if it were, we would have no idea of who might want to write letters but did not for some reason. So we decided on a telephone survey.

In May of 2003, we surveyed 1,017 U.S. adults. In addition to gathering typical demographic information (age, sex, race, income, education, etc.), we asked respondents questions related to their newspaper reading habits, whether they had recently written LTEs, and whether their letters had been published. About one third of all the respondents had written letters. We then ran statistical tests on the data to look for significant correlations. Here is what we found (keep in mind that all percentages are “within group,” such that they indicate a percentage of all of the people within the stated age group, income bracket, etc., and not a portion of people of all ages, incomes, etc.):

- **Middle-aged people are most likely to be letter-writers.** People between the ages of 45 and 64 were much more likely than other age groups to have written letters (42 percent of respondents between ages 45 and 54 had written, and 35 percent of respondents aged 55-64 had written). About a quarter

(24 percent) of people aged 35 to 44 had written, and slightly more than a quarter of people over 65 (28 percent) had written. College-aged respondents (18-24 year olds) were slightly more likely to write than 25-34 year olds, 18 percent to 13 percent. Among those who had written letters, again the 45-64 group was most likely to have had their letters published (about 22 percent), compared to 17 percent for those over age 65, 13 percent for those 35-44, and below 10 percent for those 18 to 34.

- **Successful letter-writers are most likely to have above-average incomes.** Those earning \$80,000 or more per year were the most likely to write letters and have them published (40 percent wrote, 25 percent got published), and those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$80,000 were the next most active and successful group of letter-writers (about 30 percent of them wrote, and about 19 percent of them got published). Although people with incomes below \$10,000 were more likely to write than middle-income people (36 percent of those earning less than \$10,000 had written), they were not nearly as successful at getting published — just 13 percent had been published. Only about a fifth of those earning between \$10,000 and \$40,000 (about 21 percent) had written letters, and only about 11 percent had been successful in getting their letters published.

- **Education levels correlate directly with both letter-writing activity and letter-writing success.** We found that a higher education level increase the chances of letter writing and getting letters published. Those with only some high school were least likely to write and to get published (8.8 percent and 4.4 percent, respectively); those who only finished high-school wrote about twice as much (17 percent) and were twice as likely to get published (9.2 percent); those who had some college were, again, more likely to write and get published (29.3 percent wrote, 15.2 percent got published); nearly a third of college graduates (32 percent) had written, and nearly a fifth (18.5 percent) had gotten published; and those who pursued or completed post-graduate degrees were both the most likely to write (44.7 percent) and the most likely to get published (27.3 percent).

- **Community size affects letter-writing.** Rural residents were slightly more likely to write than people living in suburbs or cities (small or large), with 32

percent of rural residents having written compared to 28 percent of suburbanites and 26 percent of both large- and small-city dwellers. Rural residents also were the most successful at getting published (20 percent, compared to 15 percent for suburbanites, 14 percent for folks in small cities, and just 10 percent for those in big cities). That wasn't surprising, given that many small-town, suburban, and rural newspapers are likely to publish a higher percentage of the letters they receive than are larger newspapers.

- **Letter-writers are frequent readers of newspapers.** Just over a third (33.8 percent) of those who read newspapers at least four times a week had written letters, compared to 19 percent of those who read zero to three times a week. The success rates between the two groups was striking — only about 8 percent of those who read three times or less per week had their letters published, compared to about 20 percent among those who read four times or more.

- **Ideology and partisanship have little bearing on letter-writing.** Our data showed that Republicans were only slightly more likely than Democrats to have written (29 percent vs. 27 percent), and that liberals were somewhat more likely than conservatives to have written (33 percent vs. 27 percent). Publication rates were similar as well — Republicans got published 16.5 percent of the time, Democrats 15.9 percent of the time, while liberals got published 18 percent of the time compared to 14.7 percent for conservatives. All of those findings were within the margin of error and, as such, the differences cannot be considered statistically significant.

- **Whites are much more likely to write than non-whites.** Among white respondents, 31.4 percent had written letters, compared to just 11.2 percent of racial minorities. And 28.5 percent of whites had their letters published, compared to just 4 percent of minorities.

- **Sex and religion do not affect letter-writing.** There were no significant differences in letter-writing and letter-writing success among men and women or religious affiliations.

All of the above led us to conclude that while letter writers are diverse in certain ways — by sex, by political views, and by ideologies — they are not diverse in terms of race, age, income, or (especially) education. As was done by past research, these findings pretty much shatter the myth that LTE forums are true “community forums,” and rather reinforce the assumption that LTEs are just for the white, middle-aged, highly educated middle class.

Who wants to write?

One additional question we asked in the survey was related to newspapers’ “must sign” policies. Previous research has shown that nearly all newspapers (95 percent) automatically reject unsigned letters, and the vast majority (85 percent) require names to be published with letters.⁵ Now, to be clear, I believe that editors are well founded in their arguments that “must-sign” policies are a deterrent for many irresponsible, vulgar, and even potentially libelous letters, but having been a letters editor myself, I know for a fact that such letters still make their way to the mailroom (it’s amazing what some people will sign their names to). My hypothesis, then, is that relaxed “must-sign” policies would simply result in more diverse letters, including high-quality letters from people who otherwise would not write letters.

In the survey, we wanted to see if those “must sign” policies had any kind of chilling effect on the general population, so we asked those respondents who had not written letters (about two-thirds of those surveyed) whether they would write letters if their names would not be published. We had some surprising findings:

- **The desire for name-withheld letters is quite high.** A full 35 percent of those who had not written letters (about 250 out of 725 people) said they would write letters if their names would be withheld. That suggests that “must sign” policies do, indeed, have a chilling effect on a large portion of the non-writing public.

⁵ Suraj Kapoor, “Most Papers Receive More Letters,” *The Masthead* 47 (Summer 1995):18-22

- **Women were more likely than men to desire anonymity in letters.**

Among the “haven’t written” group, 37.5 percent of the women said they would be willing to write if their names would be withheld, compared to 30.5 percent of men.

- **People who live in large cities are more likely to desire anonymity than people living in small cities.** About 44 percent of city-dwellers said they would be willing to write letters if their names would be withheld, compared to 30 percent of those living in small cities.

- **Younger people would be more willing to write if their names wouldn’t be published.** Among the 18-44 year age group which writes relatively few letters, 44.5 percent said they would be willing to write if their names would be withheld. Among the 45-64 year olds (the age of most letter writers), the desire for name-withheld letters dropped to 35 percent, and the desire dropped even further to about 20 percent among those older than 65.

- **People with very low or very high incomes were more likely to desire anonymity.** About half of those with incomes below \$25,000 and of those with incomes above \$80,000 said they would write letters if their names would not be published.

- **Racial minorities were more interested in writing name-withheld letters than were whites.** Nearly half (46 percent) of the minorities who had not written said they would write letters if their names would not be published, compared to about 35 percent of whites.

An earlier research project of mine looked at the evolution of those “must sign” policies, and found that they evolved in the mid-to-late 20th century due to editors’ desires to streamline the selection process (basically, it was easier to cull potential letters by rejecting certain types from the start, including unsigned letters) and to improve the readability of the letters forums (the assumption being that signed letters would be more carefully crafted and, as such, more enjoyable

to read.⁶ Over time, many journalists have come to view those “must sign” policies as moral imperatives, arguing, in essence, that people who aren’t “willing” to sign their names “don’t deserve to have their say,” and that to publish unsigned commentaries would somehow be a violation of the democratic principles of free speech.

Certainly, anonymous letters can be vehicles for unfair attacks, but editors’ fear of publishing unfair attacks and disdain for “cowardly speech” has created a blind spot toward the potential value of anonymous letters in democratic speech. Ironically, the right to anonymous speech was an important freedom demanded by the proponents of the U.S. Bill of Rights (some anti-Federalists argued that requiring names to be printed with opinions in newspapers was a “despotic scheme of government” and that, as a writer called “Detector” wrote in the New York Journal in October 1787, the practice would “reverse the important doctrine of the freedom of the press” and was “the introduction of this first trait of slavery into your country.”⁷ The U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice William Rehnquist has upheld anonymous speech as an important tradition in American democracy (a key ruling was *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission* in 1995, in which the Court upheld the right to anonymously distribute political fliers).⁸

Beyond the legal right to anonymous speech, newspapers’ “must sign” policies also can contradict several ethical standards of journalism. Consider the following tenets from the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists:

- *“Journalists should ... identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability. ... Always question sources’ motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.”*

While some might read the above as a prohibition against anonymous letters,

⁶ Bill Reader, “Should ‘A Citizen’ Have His Say? A Historical Argument for the Publication of Unsigned Commentary in ‘Letters to the Editor’ Forums,” (paper presented at AEJMC Washington, D.C., August 2001)

⁷ John Kaminski, J. and Gaspare Saladino (1981). *Documentary of the Ratification of the Constitution*, v.13. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin: p. 318.

⁸ *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission* (1995). 514 U.S. 334; 115 S. Ct. 1511; 1995 U.S. LEXIS 2847

others might see that the tenet is an outline for accommodation of anonymity. Certainly, a “signed” LTE will have more credibility in the eyes of some, but a signature alone doesn’t assure an editor that the information in a letter is reliable, nor does it necessarily reveal the motives of a writer. More importantly, the tenet suggests that sometimes promises of anonymity are essential to journalistic practice, not just in news gathering.

- *“Journalists should ... tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.”* Again, both anonymous letters and the newspapers that publish them likely would come under fire from many directions, but if publishing such letters allows more diverse voices to be heard on the pages, shouldn’t newspapers be willing to take the criticism?

- *“Journalists should ... examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.”* If many journalists believe that public speech is reserved only for those willing to identify themselves, then aren’t they imposing their values on others when they deride and/or ignore those who want to speak anonymously?

- *“Journalists should ... support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”* Again, if journalists think anonymous LTEs would result in “repugnant” letters, or if they think anonymity itself is repugnant, are they then not violating this tenet by blocking such letters from their forums?

- *“Journalists should ... give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.”* As the evidence from the survey suggests, what if the only barrier for some of the “voiceless” is a “must sign” policy?

Now, I’m not suggesting that editors simply repeal the policies altogether. But if editors truly want their LTE forums to be open marketplaces of ideas, they can make a few modifications to attract new customers:

- First, choose letters based on the quality of their content more than on whether or not the writers are willing to have their names published. When selecting letters, editors should start by looking for the most poignant, the most

original, and the most diverse. Also, consider whether the identity of the writer is essential information — in many cases, the ideas in letters are what matter, not the writers' names. That alone would circumvent the unhappy situation in which an editor must publish a so-so letter instead of a great letter that was unsigned.

- Second, evaluate “name withheld” letters the same way you evaluate “anonymous source” requests. That is, make sure the person is known to the newspaper, that the person agrees to being identified in some descriptive manner, and that the person might have a legitimate reason for remaining anonymous.

- Third, publicize your criteria. Editors do this all the time in terms of how long letters should be or what kinds of topics might not be published (poetry, thank-you notes, etc.). Perhaps a line suggesting: “The editor will consider requests to publish letters without names if the opinions expressed are deemed worthy of such protections. Abuses of anonymity, such as unfair attacks, incivility, or false claims, will not be considered at all.”

With a little trial and error, editors might find that relaxing their “must sign” policies might not prove to be as onerous as they predict, especially when they consider that requiring names to be published with letters doesn't guarantee that the content of the letter is reliable — or even that the person signing the letter wrote it in the first place.

“Turf”? Or “astroturf”?

The third aspect of LTEs I'd like to address is the relatively recent concerns among editors related to “astroturf.” “Astroturf” is the term many journalists have applied to letter-writing campaigns in which special interest groups provide pre-written letters that supporters can sign their names to and submit as original letters. The practice gained national attention in 2003 when it was found that the same letter extolling the economic policies of George W. Bush was published in at least a dozen newspapers across the country, each signed by a different person from a different community.⁹ Since then, several

⁹ Bill Reader, “Interest groups facilitate ‘Astroturf’ letters to the editor,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 26, 2 (forthcoming, Spring 2005).

newspapers have published editorials condemning the practice; some have modified policies to reject such letters; and members of the National Conference of Editorial Writers routinely use their e-mail listserv to share suspect letters. Meanwhile, several special interest groups have adopted the practice, many with considerable sophistication (for example, the Bush-Cheney campaign used an interactive feature on its Web site to help supporters “build” letters using several prepared passages from which to pick and choose; the Web site also had an automated system for even packaging and mailing the letters on behalf of their supporters).

To campaigners, the practice certainly has a lot of appeal — it’s a great way to get a carefully prepared message published verbatim and for free, and to give it the appearance of a “grass roots” movement (in fact, the fake “grass roots” aspect is what gives the practice the nickname of “astroturf”). Some have defended the practice as enabling people to participate in the democratic process. Editors, meanwhile, seem to be especially disdainful toward the letters, perhaps due to their general disdain for campaign operatives, more likely due to the deceptive nature of the practice.

Regardless of the motives for and reactions to “astroturf” letters, one big question that had not yet been answered is how widespread the practice really is. To that end, I developed a content analysis study that would focus on special-interest groups that encourage supporters to write letters to the editor, what suggestions they give to would-be writers, and whether those groups go so far as to facilitate “astroturf.”

I limited the study to Web sites that included the phrase “How to write a letter to the editor.” I drew a random sample of 200 such Web sites from all the active links returned from the three most popular Internet search engines: Google, Yahoo!, and MSN.com. Duplicates and journalism sites were discarded (for example, several newspapers’ Web sites offered suggestions to would-be writers). On each site, I looked for different suggestions each group offered to would-be writers, from general guidelines related to length, frequency, tone, etc.,

to the degree to which each group encouraged “astroturf” letters. Here are some of the key findings:

- **Political groups are most likely to encourage supporters to write LTEs.** Ignoring the “astroturf” issue for a moment, the findings give an overall sense of what kinds of groups encourage supporters to write LTEs. Exactly 50 percent of the groups from the sample were political groups, or groups that were specifically promoting candidates, ballot initiatives, or changes in government policy. The next-largest group (27 percent of the sample) was classified as “health/environmental” groups, or groups promoting research or civil action to address health problems and/or environmental degradation. The third-largest group (14 percent of the sample) was classified as “professional/educational,” or organizations that were simply interested in spreading awareness about certain professions, hobbies, ethnicities, religions, and the like. Web sites with no clear motives were classified as “other,” and constituted just 8.5 percent of the sample.

- **For LTE campaigns, special-interest groups target newspapers in general, and small newspapers in particular.** The findings show us that special-interest groups recognize that letters to newspapers are somehow more valuable than letters to other media, such as magazines, broadcast news stations, even the Web. About 93 percent of the sample suggested “targets” for LTEs, and 93 percent of the sample specifically suggested sending LTEs to newspapers — in other words, those groups that promote LTE campaigns almost all want those letters published in newspapers. The next most frequently suggested “target” was magazines, which was mentioned a scant 11 percent of the time, then TV/radio stations, which was mentioned just 6.5 percent of the time — again, indicating that newspapers are seen as “the” target for letters. Suggestions to send LTE’s to “local/small” newspapers occurred 67.5 percent of the time, often with comments that such newspapers were more likely to publish an individual’s letter than were larger or metro papers (only 11 percent of the sample suggested sending LTE’s to metro papers).

- **Most special-interest groups recognize certain “rules” newspapers impose on letter writers.** Past research had shown that most newspapers

impose certain limits on letter writers, the most common being letter length, frequency (as in, how frequently one person can be published), and, as discussed earlier, the writer's name. Those criteria are recognized by many (and, sometimes, by most) of the groups that encourage supporters to write LTEs. About two-thirds (65.5 percent) suggested that letters be short, and many even gave specific word lengths, the most common being between 200 and 300 words; 57 percent reminded writers to sign their names to letters (and 41 percent explained that the newspapers would call to verify authorship); 48 percent suggested that the writers respond to specific articles published in the target publication; and from 26 to 29 percent of them recommended that writers read published letters policies, that writers be "civil" with their writing, and that newspapers will likely reject letters that are not originals. Those findings suggest two things that are important when considering the "astroturf" issue — the first, that at least two-thirds majority of the groups in question recognize that newspapers have "rules" for letters; the second, that nearly 30 percent recognize that newspapers routinely reject letters they suspect of being "duplicates."

- **Only a small percentage of groups actively promote "astroturf," and only about a third facilitate it. Most ignore it.** For this part of the analysis, I determined the degree to which each group promoted "astroturf." Groups that specifically promoted use of prepared text as original letters accounted for just 15.5 percent of the groups. About 18 percent provided "sample text" but gave no mention of whether writers should or should not copy-and-paste the text into their own LTE's (I categorized those as "implying" astroturf, since they provided the text). Together, the "promoters" and the "impliers" accounted for 33.5 percent of the sample — essentially, one third of the sample could be likely sources of "astroturf." Conversely, just 6.5 percent of the sample warned writers to not copy text from other letters (that is, they "opposed" the practice). The rest — a full 60 percent — simply "ignored" the topic altogether, providing neither sample text nor any mention of copying text.

- **A surprisingly high percentage of "promoters" also warn writers to "be original."** Finally, I compared those groups who recognized that

newspapers reject “astroturf” to those groups’ attitudes toward “astroturf.” Not surprisingly, the vast majority of opponents encouraged originality (92.3 percent), and a large majority of both “impliers” and “ignorers” made no mention of originality (78 and 79 percent, respectively). What was surprising and puzzling, however, was that 41.9 percent of the groups that “promote” copying LTEs also recognized that newspapers reject copied letters. That seemingly contradictory condition prompted me to go back and look at the originals. As it turns out, many of those sites encouraged writers to “add your own stories” or to only use only a paragraph or two from the prepared text in an otherwise “original” letter. A few noted that adapting the text into original letters would circumvent newspapers’ “originality” requirements — basically, they encouraged writers to “cheat.”

For the optimistic, the findings suggest several things. First off, the evidence shows that special-interest groups recognize the importance of LTE forums in newspapers over all other media, suggesting that LTEs are an information service in which newspapers are superior to other news outlets, even the Internet. The study also shows that most groups that encourage supporters to write LTEs probably have genuine “turf” in mind — they simply want people to speak out on an issue, in their own words. And the majority of such groups recognize (some might even respect) newspapers’ guidelines for LTE submissions, at least in terms of length limits and “must-sign” policies.

For the pessimistic, however, the findings point out that nearly a third of the groups that encourage LTE writing can facilitate “astroturf,” and more than two-fifth of the groups that actually promote “astroturf” might be knowingly engaged in deception against newspapers. The findings also suggest that such groups also promote a blending of “astroturf” and original letter writing, meaning that editors who want to keep “astroturf” out of their papers might have to start looking for duplicated sentences and paragraphs rather than whole letters. While that “cheating” group is a very small percentage of the whole — just 6.5 percent of the whole sample — it does seem to represent editors’ worst fears about “astroturf”: that some special-interest groups are knowingly abusing access to LTE forums.

Conclusion

There can be no question that newspapers take LTEs seriously, or they wouldn't commit so much time, energy, space, and money to providing, editing, and printing the forums. But when it comes to modifying and updating their content, newspapers seem to be stuck in the mid-20th century when it comes to conceptualizing their LTEs.

For starters, LTE forums clearly aren't used by a cross-section of the community, something that hasn't changed much since the mid-20th century. Rather, most LTE writers are white, middle-aged, educated, and upper middle-class — perhaps suggesting that those demographics are predictors of newspaper readership, but also suggesting that those people are the most comfortable with expressing their opinions in print. Perhaps LTEs have always appealed to such people, or perhaps the forums have evolved over the decades so that other groups of people have lost interest in the forums. It could also suggest that confidence might be a factor in letter-writing, since most letter writers are people who are in their peak work years, with advanced educations and comfortable salaries.

The survey offers no suggestions for attracting more diverse voices to the LTE forums, except in terms of the “must sign” policies most newspapers initiated in the mid-20th century. Those policies might be ready for some reform. Several newspapers across the nation have experimented with anonymous commentary from the public — such as the anonymous call-in forums many papers launched in the 1980s and 1990s — but research suggests those forums are significantly different from true LTE forums, as many are seen more as entertainment than venues for “serious” discourse.¹⁰ But few editors seem willing to even think about relaxing their “must-sign” policies, even when faced with evidence that more women, racial minorities, and young adults might submit letters if their names could be withheld. The vulnerability of women and minorities to harassment, and the insecurities of young adults just beginning their work years, might help explain such findings. Perhaps if editors begin selecting letters based

¹⁰ James Aucoin (1997). “Does newspaper call-in line expand public conversation?” Newspaper Research Journal, 18 (3-4): 122-140.

solely on their quality, and insist that writers reveal themselves to the editors if not the reading public, they might attract more diverse writers.

Another consideration is that requiring signatures does not preclude deception, in the case of “astroturf” letters. But considering the findings that relatively few groups promote the use of “astroturf,” the industry buzz about the problem might be overreaction to a few egregious cases of abuse. At minimum, editors who do routine Web searches to “catch” such cheaters might be wasting their time. Perhaps a better approach would be for a group such as NCEW to maintain a public list of organizations that are known to promote “astroturf,” and categorize the list by the issues such groups are focused on — that way, editors who get a suspicious letter have a quicker means of determining if it might be a “fake.” But as with anonymous letters, I think editors might do well to not be so quick to judge the letter writers who submit “astroturf” — after all, to a culture accustomed to expressing their feelings with pre-printed greeting cards and bumper stickers, the idea of signing a pre-written LTE isn’t necessarily problematic, and may, in fact, be considered preferable to a “home-done” letter. An “astroturf” letter is better than no letter at all, and it represents a willingness of somebody to participate in the discussion. With a little encouragement, such a person could become a writer of genuine “turf.”

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