

# In age of disinformation, newspaper political endorsements should be embraced, not abandoned

In early October, Alden Global Capital instructed the newspapers it owns to stop endorsing for major political offices after this year. “Unfortunately, as the public discourse has become increasingly acrimonious, common ground has become a no man’s land between the clashing forces of the culture wars,” the company [confirmed](#) to the New York Times.

Alden [bought the Chicago Tribune last year](#). It also owns The Denver Post, the St. Paul Pioneer Press, the Boston Herald, The Mercury News of San Jose, the East Bay Times, The Orange County Register, and the Orlando Sentinel.

In the age of scarcity and polarization, newspaper groups [far and wide](#) are abandoning the endorsement tradition, arguing that they are irrelevant in today’s world, that they create confusion about whether opinion-page bias extends to news articles, and (insert genuine reason here) that they offend subscribers.



(Photo by Tony Webster via Flickr)

Eric Zorn, a former Chicago Tribune columnist whom I greatly respect, used his [Picayune Sentinel blog](#) to cheer on this apparent change in tradition, among other things questioning who self-important editorial boards speak for in the first place. What follows, with minor editing, is the reply I sent him.

In 2004, the Daily Herald (where I worked) endorsed John Kerry for president, arguing that George W. Bush ceded his claim on the White House when he led the United States into the Iraq war under false pretenses. A significant number of subscribers cancelled to protest that endorsement (In a spirit of damned-if-you-do; damned-if-you-don't, the Tribune, I seem to recall, lost substantially more for endorsing Bush).

All of that sounds like it could be an argument for abandoning presidential endorsements. It is only if you think newspapers should never offend anyone.

The cancellations caused concern, to be sure. But the experience taught us how to better present controversial viewpoints in a way that enables critics to respond as part of a debate rather than as part of a protest. We aimed to be respectful without pulling punches. We highlighted opportunities to respond. Beyond the obvious business sense that inspired this approach, it more importantly, if coincidentally, created an inclusive atmosphere the Fourth Estate ought to foster as part of its role in a free society.

I am proud of that 2004 endorsement not simply for the position it took but also in the way we all take pride in acts that require some degree of well-reasoned courage, in the way I am proud of other editorial positions the paper has taken when it would have been easier to look the other way. Combined with the journalism we do, editorials and endorsements are an integral part of saying who we are.

They say who we are to our readers, to our community, to those with influence, to those who pass and enforce laws, to those who need a hand, to those who wish to prosper, to those who would subvert, to those who would seek our endorsement. Combined with the journalism we do, these positions say who we are.

As importantly, they say it also to ourselves. Not just to the editorial writers or to the newsroom, but to every corner of the newspaper. It is not just a source of pride, but a reminder to all of us including the business side that there is a greater good, that this is who we are.

It is hard to pinpoint the cause of our era's trend toward abandonment of endorsements and of editorials and opinion pages in general. Some of it, no doubt, is loss of resources. Some of it, no doubt, a fear of offending readers.

I view it mainly and sadly as the latest slope in the long, terrible decline of mattering.

I suspect conglomerates – by nature of remote direction, Wall Street and perhaps-unavoidable cost-cutting – run a risk of losing sight of the communities where they publish. And if so, they lose sight of what newspapers really are and of the interconnectedness they always had with the communities they served.

We grew up hearing that the press is The Fourth Estate, perhaps without contemplating what that meant. Here's what it meant: We were not just a business. We were a part of what makes self-government work. We had access to the powerful and also had their ear. We were part of what knits a community together.

We were an institution.

As an institution, a newspaper has both a relationship with its community and a stake in its health. We don't just publish

in it. We don't just report on it. We live in it. We are part of the community and we care about it and the people in it. That is the point of the journalism a newspaper does. That is the point of engaging with the audience. That also is the point, even the obligation, to offer a forum for public debate, and the point, even the obligation, to offer thoughtful editorials and endorsements.

And while our readers may sometimes or even frequently disagree with our positions, most value our caring enough to offer them. One of the wonderful (and awful) things about the Web is we can measure readership and we can measure the path to subscriptions. Endorsements routinely measure high in both. Readers value them. But beyond that, the reception they garner is a reflection of the trust a newspaper has built with its readership and the relationship between them. Readers appreciate that while our editorials and endorsements come with a point of view, they will not come packed with the misinformation so heavily traveled by social media, ideological sites and political messaging.

Zorn asked, why aren't endorsements bylined? While this probably is not true at every newspaper, at the one where I worked, the members of the Editorial Board are listed on the editorial page and on the website. He also asked, why can't the benefits of endorsements be accomplished by columnists? Some of those things are. The more, as they say, the merrier. I say it too. That said, the Tribune e-blasts opinion pieces at me seemingly all day. I see the headlines, pick them up assuming they represent the institution's point of view, but frequently find many are op-ed pieces traveling under cover of Tribune darkness. Perhaps it is only me, but when I discover that, the weight of what they have to say matters less. They can engage, they can be provocative, they can make me think – all wonderful things. But they carry less weight.

I understand that some critics of endorsements may give ground when it comes to local races. There, they concede, the reader

may be seeking advice. But what about the race for the White House? The top of ticket races for governor or the Senate? I agree that when it comes to those races, most voters do not need an editorial to help them decide. But well-researched and well-crafted (as with anything, the devil is in the details), these endorsements do succeed in elevating perspectives. Once elected, the performance of those in high office still will be subject to review. The endorsements add to the body of that review.

And of course, they help readers better understand the newspaper that has gained their loyalty.

Beyond that, I am reminded of my long-ago days of running the marathon. If you are giving that race your best, inevitably toward the end, you hit The Wall. When I first started running the marathon, I would hit The Wall and wonder, "What am I doing out here?" But over time, I came to understand that it was The Wall itself that drew me out. It is the reason a runner races 26.2 miles. It is the test. Every runner needs to know: When you hit that Wall, do you respond as a repentant warrior or as a heroic champion?

The same is true of endorsements. We are not here for the morning jog.

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