



A Matter of Opinion: The *Oregonian* Editorial Board and Sam Adams

Teaching Note

Case Summary

Ever since the 1850s, when *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley established a distinct page for opinion, most newspapers have—at least officially—separated factual reporting from personal views. As a result, the right to voice opinions has been confined to a relative minority—notably columnists, guest essayists, and editorial writers. But while columns and guest pieces are typically authored by individuals who present personal ideas under their own bylines, editorials are produced by a group of people who anonymously articulate the position of the paper itself.

This case focuses on the editor of one such group at the *Oregonian* newspaper in 2009 as he and his colleagues struggled to respond to a local scandal. In January, news broke that Portland's openly-gay and popular new mayor, Sam Adams, had been romantically involved with a man who may have been a minor at the time. The information challenged the *Oregonian's* seven-person editorial board, which had endorsed Adams just eight months earlier and was now faced with a quandary: Should it call for his resignation? Complicating their decision was the fact that Adams had categorically denied the two-year-old affair when a rival mayoral candidate raised the rumor eight months earlier.

Students follow the *Oregonian* as it weighs how to respond to the evolving scandal. They trace the history of the paper's editorial board, and learn about its ideological composition, as well as its staffing structure. They also learn about Oregon's politics, the state's previous political sex scandals, Adams' political rise, and rumors of his alleged sexual relationship with a minor. Just one week after taking office, Adams, under pressure from another newspaper, confesses to the affair, which he insists did not occur until the young man was of age. The editorial board, which meets with Adams to hear his side of the story, must decide how to act. What information does it need? What commentary should it provide? Class members step into the shoes of Editorial Page Editor Bob Caldwell, and other members of the board, as they weigh what to do next.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to discuss editorial writing and the responsibility of an editorial board to the community. Also use it as a platform for talking about objective versus opinion journalism, and how media cover sexuality, and homosexuality in particular.

All the *Oregonian's* editorial board members inform discussion, suggest topics, and write editorials, but Caldwell alone decides which arguments the editorial page will present. “[The board] is not a democracy,” he states. Consider Caldwell’s comment in the context of who sits on the editorial board and how it functions. What is the board’s ideal composition—politically, educationally, and otherwise? Should its work be consensus-based and reflect the views of all board members, or does the page benefit when only one person takes control of its content? Also discuss the relationship between editorials and their readers. To what extent, for example, should editorials seek to shape rather than merely reflect community values, and vice versa?

Like most US newspapers, the *Oregonian* devotes the last two pages of its Metro section to opinion writing—a tradition rooted in the mid-19th century drive to separate news from opinion. That distinction has been questioned in recent years, amid doubts that “objective” journalism is possible or even desirable. Students should consider the place of editorials within a media landscape filled with opinion journalism and instant access to information. Are editorials still relevant? If so, what functions do they fulfill that other forms of opinion writing do not?

According to editorial board member Susan Nielsen, Adams’ homosexuality is “not an issue” for Portland or fellow board members. Her observation appears to be supported by a 2003 survey of city voters, and the generally left-leaning orientation of the board. But is the *Oregonian's* readership—which includes not only Portland but the surrounding counties and parts of Washington state—as liberal as conventional wisdom suggests? And are the journalists really as open-minded as they profess? How might the Adams scandal have developed, if at all, had he been straight? Debate these issues as part of a broader discussion about the media’s handling of sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. Do different standards apply, and if so, in what way?

Class Plan

Use this case in a course about editorial writing; covering scandal; reporting on sexual issues; and journalism’s function within, and responsibility to, the broader community.

Study questions. Help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following question in advance:

- 1) What role should editorials play in today’s media landscape?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the

students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) Although all editorial board members may inform discussion about the *Oregonian's* editorial pages, Caldwell ultimately determines what positions the newspaper takes. What are the pros and cons of this structure? Should editorials be based on consensus, or it is inevitable—and even preferable—that one person steers their content?
- b) Like most American newspapers, the *Oregonian* leaves its editorials unsigned. The reason, according to *New York Times* Editorial Page Editor Andrew Rosenthal, is that editorials “are meant to represent an institutional opinion, not a personal opinion.” To what extent does this conflict with Caldwell’s assertion that he alone is “responsible for what appears on the editorial page?”
- c) According to Rosenthal, the *Times* editorial board consists of “highly qualified, educated, and deeply experienced professional journalists.” What are the ideal qualifications, educational backgrounds, and experiences of an editorial board member?
- d) The *Oregonian's* editorial board consists of Caldwell and six other members who each write on specific subjects, including education, government ethics, state politics, and child welfare. What would be the ideal make-up of the team dealing with the Adams scandal in 2009?
- e) Like other newspapers, the *Oregonian* insists that its opinion and news operations remain separate, and structures its newsroom accordingly. To what extent is this a realistic or even desirable goal? Should editorial board members still be active beat reporters or focus exclusively on editorials?
- f) Officially, the *Oregonian's* board does “not strive to reflect the views of its politically diverse readership, but rather to inform them.” Should the paper aim to mirror, or shape, the ideological make-up and viewpoints of its audience?
- g) The *Oregonian* is aware as early as August 2007 that Adams is accused of having a sexual relationship with a minor. Ultimately, however, both the paper’s City Hall reporter and editorial writer David Sarasohn determine that the allegations are false. To what extent has the paper’s ability to cover the story in 2009 been compromised by its failure to uncover the truth two years earlier?

- h) Adams' sexuality and rumors of his relationship with Breedlove "barely" come up when the editorial board considers its pick for mayor. Was the newspaper right to focus on policy matters, or was the board negligent in overlooking such issues? Given that Adams' alleged love interest denied the affair, what else could the *Oregonian* have done to pursue the story?
- i) Susan Nielsen's first thought after Adams visits the board to give his side of the story is that "we need more information... there's always more to the story." If you were a member of the *Oregonian* editorial board, what information would you need to formulate a response to Adams' confession, and how would you get it?
- j) How quickly should the board publish a response after Adams' visit: immediately, in a few days or only after the whole story unfolds? Consider the strengths and weaknesses of each option. In doing so, consider the wider function of an editorial, its responsibilities to its audience, and to its subjects.
- k) The *Oregonian's* editorial board is committed to taking positions based on a "solid understanding of the facts." It also knows that it must respond to Adams' confession as quickly as possible. To what extent do these goals conflict—and which goal should prevail?
- l) In 2004, the *Oregonian* faced public rancor for an editorial related to a sex scandal involving former Oregon Governor Neil Goldschmidt and a 14-year-old babysitter almost 20 years earlier. Many readers said the paper's editorial was too soft on Goldschmidt, whom it described as a "brilliant public man" felled by "stunning personal failure." What bearing, if any, should Goldschmidt's case have on the board's approach to the Adams scandal?
- m) Caldwell is concerned that readers will misconstrue an editorial calling for Adams' resignation as a response to the mayor simply having had an affair, or a homosexual relationship. To what extent should Caldwell consider possible reader reaction when choosing the *Oregonian's* editorial stance? Discuss as part of a broader debate about whether editorials should aim to lead or reflect public opinion.
- n) *Oregonian* editorial board members pride themselves on their liberal attitudes towards homosexuality, which they insist plays no part in their attitude towards Adams. Still, Nielsen questions whether the board, either as a group or as individuals, is "overreacting because he's gay." What do you think?
- o) You are on the editorial board. Do you call for Adam's resignation?

Suggested Readings

Jennifer Dorroh, "Wiki: Don't Lose That Number," *American Journalism Review*, August/September 2005.

SYNOPSIS: The editorial is, as Dorroh notes, traditionally an “insider’s game.” In 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* attempted to change that when it invited the public to alter or contribute to an editorial that it posted online as a “wiki.” The experiment failed when, less than 48 hours later, obscene material was uploaded to the site and the newspaper pulled the wiki. Despite the bad experience, Dorroh argues that news organizations should not abandon the idea of co-editing and producing content with their audiences. Use the piece to discuss how editorials are written, and whether collaborative editing is viable and even desirable.

http://ajr.org/article_printable.asp?id=3947

Michael Gartner, “Griping About Newspaper Editorials Doesn’t Change,” *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2005.

SYNOPSIS: As Gartner notes, editorials have been a controversial part of newspapers since they first appeared more than a century ago. While some papers have considered abolishing them altogether, others have opened them up to the public. But according to the author, who won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1997, “it is folly—and dereliction of duty—for newspapers to abandon editorials, and it is equal folly to move to group-edit or groupthink.” He insists that editorials must “always be strong parts of newspapers,” especially in an age of “instant news and instant rumor, [where] thought is a commodity in scarce supply.” The real challenge, he says, is ensuring that people read the editorials in the first place. Use his piece as a counterargument to that presented by Richard Stengel (see below).

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100646>

Michael Gartner and the Newseum, *Outrage, Passion & Uncommon Sense: How Editorial Writers Have Taken On the Great American Issues of the Past 150 Years*. Washington DC: National Geographic, 2005.

SYNOPSIS: “Editorials are the heart and soul of the newspaper,” Gartner writes in the introduction to his book, a compilation of some of the most outstanding and noteworthy editorials of the last century and a half. The book is divided by subject matter and focuses on editorials written by four men whom Gartner calls the “the four greatest editorial writers in the history of this nation”: William Allen White, Horace Greeley, Henry Watterson, and Vermont Royster. The text is sprinkled with page reproductions, photos of editorial writers such as Hazel Brannon Smith (the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing), and pictures of well-known editorial subjects, like slavery abolitionist John Brown. While the book’s limited focus on four editorial writers and oversized format means that it may not be ideal reading for assigned reading, it provides a fascinating and visual reference for class members interested in the broader subject of US newspaper editorial writing.

Pulitzer Prize Editorials: America's Best Writing, 1917-2003, [compiled by] Wm. David Sloan, Laird B. Anderson. 3rd ed. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Press, 2003.

SYNOPSIS: This anthology of Pulitzer Prize editorials, which spans almost a century and includes brief introductions to unabridged texts of winning pieces, provides students with some of the most highly regarded examples of the genre, and a sense of how editorial writing has developed over the years.

Kimberly Meltzer, "Newspaper Editorial Boards and the Practice of Endorsing Candidates for Political Office in the United States," *Journalism*, 2007, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 83-103.

SYNOPSIS: "American newspaper editorial boards occupy unusual positions within their newspapers as they only journalists at their papers who may openly express their opinions. When they exercise their opinion-making power in the forms of candidate endorsements, they potentially intervene in the democratic process by influencing readers' voting decisions." So writes Meltzer, who interviews 16 editorial board members from four different papers to find out what role and function they think they fulfill in the endorsement process. She finds that while they are "reflective about the opportunities and dilemmas granted to them by their positions... their dispositions on these issues ranged from grave concern to flippant dismissal." Endorsement decisions, she adds, are "not always conducted with stringent adherence to the principles that would make it a real service for the readers, and thus for democracy." Use the article to discuss the role of editorial boards, and whether it is appropriate for them to endorse political candidates like Sam Adams.

Richard Stengel, "Should Newspapers Be Taking Sides?" *Time Magazine*, February 20, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: "I confess that I've never quite understood why newspapers endorse presidential candidates," *Time Magazine's* Managing Editor Richard Stengel writes. "Sure, I know the history and the tradition, the fact that newspapers in the 18th and 19th centuries were often affiliated with political parties, but why do they do it now? Why do it at a time when the credibility and viability of the press are at all-time lows? More important, why do it at a time when readers, especially young readers, question the objectivity of newspapers in particular and the media in general?" Use Stengel's argument to fuel discussion about newspaper endorsements raised in the case.

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1715046,00.html>