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“Every Four Years we Shoot Ourselves in the Foot”: Should News Outlets still Endorse Political Candidates?

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"Every four years we shoot ourselves in the foot": Why do news outlets still endorse political candidates?

Interviewing 64 U.S. political journalists, we found that many of them have come to view their outlets' political endorsements as a liability.

NiemanLab

Gregory P. Perreault & Volha Kananovich

Endorsements for politicians have a long history in U.S. newspapers, which until the 20th century were usually explicitly aligned with one political party or faction. Traditionally, endorsements have fallen under the purview of a newspaper's owner or its editorial board. Journalists may know the decision of which candidate to endorse is distinct from the newsroom's reporting, but many readers don't separate the two.

As we recently found, in [a study](#) published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, many journalists themselves have come to see editorial endorsements as a liability. In 2020, we interviewed 64 political journalists with affiliations ranging from digital-only news outlets to national magazines to local and national newspapers. Most of the journalists we interviewed didn't question their newsrooms' ability to uphold the metaphorical wall between the editorial and reporting sides, with one reporter referring to it as "a pretty strict firewall."

However, they also felt the need to explain to readers the divide between the endorsement from a newspaper's editorial board and the newspaper's other journalists. Some reporters told us that their sources would ask them why they had endorsed the other candidate, and journalists would find themselves clarifying that *they* hadn't endorsed anyone — their editorial board had. As one journalist put it: "Nobody knows the distinction between the editorial board and the reporters, and that's our fault for not telling them. Every four years we shoot ourselves in the foot." Another noted: "Political parties like to bash some news organizations, leading to viewers believing a news organization is biased." Endorsements, he added, "can exacerbate those preconceived notions."

The journalists in our study largely found the practice of political endorsements to be arcane. (Eight of those we spoke to defended endorsements, but even in those cases it was conditional — for example, one journalist argued the practice should exist only on a community level.) Even supporters of the idea of the endorsement felt that the practice exacerbated the already hard work of political journalism, complicated by growing political polarization and audience mistrust.

“Readers pay little attention to that distinction mark between opinion and non-opinion,” a journalist told us. “It contributes to the public’s view that publications have an agenda.”

Notably, when delineating the separation between the newsroom’s editorial board and news desk, journalists did so not only metaphorically — by evoking the imagery of the wall separating the two — but also grammatically, through the pronouns they used in explaining their newsroom’s practice to us. Journalists who worked in newsrooms that *did* offer endorsements used the term “they” to denote the editorial board and to emphasize their separation from the endorsement process. In contrast, when journalists were in newsrooms that *did not* offer endorsements, they often used the term “we” in describing the practice (e.g., “we don’t do that”), a rhetorical move signaling they embraced and internalized this position. One journalist said they had actually left their newsroom because it offered editorial endorsements.

Beyond issues of wellbeing and audience concern, the journalists we interviewed also indicated that endorsements aren’t particularly effective. In the words of one journalist, endorsements are likely to “affect the public’s perception of newspapers more than their perception of candidates.” In the 2016 election, [more than 500 editorial endorsements were cast for Hillary Clinton](#). For Donald Trump, the election's eventual winner? Fewer than 30. While Clinton won the popular vote in that election, this nevertheless calls to question what is actually the value of the process.

Some papers are already changing their policies. In the runup to the 2020 U.S. election, 30 McClatchy made a policy for its newspaper chain: papers in the newspaper chain [refrained](#) from making presidential endorsements unless they’d had the opportunity to individually interview both presidential candidates. The Dallas Morning News [made a similar decision](#) to endorse neither candidate.

The journalists we interviewed said that editorial endorsements were most valuable in *local* races. The kinds of relationships local newspapers cultivate with their readers, they said, are different from those cultivated by their national counterparts. For starters, local newspapers enjoy a [higher level of trust](#) with their readers than national newspapers. This might make it more likely that the public will perceive editorial endorsements as an example of newspapers delivering on their promise to inform the public, rather than as examples of media bias.

In contrast to state and federal contests, journalists argued, in local elections, such as city council or mayoral races, contenders often run as nonpartisan candidates, which may make it less likely that the public would look at editorial endorsements through a partisan lens. A few pointed out that in local elections— which often end up overshadowed by the news coverage of national races — robust information about candidates is often lacking. This, again, can justify newspapers’ decisions to issue editorial endorsements as part of their service to the public.

Based on our research, it is worth considering whether this is a tradition that continues to serve the public.

“The public cannot tell the difference,” one journalist told us. “When they hear, ‘The New York Times’ editorial endorsed Elizabeth Warren,’ for example, it trickles down on the journalist.”

And as another argued, “news media should never be endorsing political candidates. It defies the point of remaining neutral.”