

# Anatomy of an op-ed

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The editorial page of your favorite newspaper or magazine is primarily (but not 100%) push-driven. Editors don't solicit editorials; editorials solicit editors.

Here's the timeline: I wrote a 700-word op-ed on Tuesday, and sent it to the think tank's Communications department, where we have a few people who work full-time on placing op-ed pieces in the newspapers. Ms AM wrote up a polite cover, and emailed it to the editors of a paper or two (I don't know how many). The editor of the Wall Street Journal wrote back on Friday, saying that he'll run the thing as a letter. He cut a few hundred words, sent it back to me and Ms AM for approval, I made two tweaks, the editor prepended a sensational headline that I did not approve, and it ran in today's paper.

Among the columns pushed upon him or her, what will an editor pick? No surprises: the work will have to be apropos to current news, and will have to be sensational. Simmering-but-not-boiling issues will not run. Moderate opinions will not run. Or at least, as in the case of my editorial, relatively moderate opinions will be revised to sound as sensational as possible.

## Topical

The *topical topics only* rule produces a random draw somewhat biased toward pressing issues. On any given day, one out of fifty pressing problems breaks, and that one gets to be in the news that day. It ain't the most efficient method, but I suppose there are worse.

The trouble with patents has been building for a decade, but it hasn't been in the mainstream press until the whole thing about the Blackberry hit. Now, it's easy for me to get op-eds printed, because disaster is already starting to strike. But wouldn't it be great if people could have gotten press five years ago about how trouble like the Blackberry case is on its way? But punchiness really does force the press to be reactive instead of proactive.

The guys on Capitol Hill want desperately to be proactive. They're smart folks, and many of them care about good policy. That means that the press, to the extent that it goes after what happened yesterday, is of limited relevance to policymakers. Conversely, to the extent that rulemaking is about obscure details of legal code, policymakers are assured that general media will not molest them.

## Brief

The other problem is in writing for tiny attention spans. As I have demonstrated often enough, I could easily write a 7,000 word article on the problem of defining patentable subject matter, and that would still be omitting loads of details. But news media are much more interested in covering lots of topics in minimal detail rather than one topic in depth. And so, I get to cut that article down into a 700-word op-ed, from which the editors will delete a few hundred words. Especially with online media, this isn't necessary, because readers can be brought to the well and drink as much as they choose to. But there's a 700-word standard out there that everybody seems to stick to anyway.

TV and radio are only worse. They have a hard-and-fast time constraint, meaning that they have no choice but to be on the low-detail end of the spectrum. A five-minute piece can not have much more content than a one-page op-ed, which is not much. I've done a few interviews for the nice people at NPR. One went for half an hour, and my final on-air time in the three-minute piece was a single sentence—I didn't even get a semicolon. Last week, I got a call where I was explaining the situation to a radio reporter, and she said, exasperated, "We've been talking for thirteen minutes now and I still don't have a good ten-second clip." I wound up getting cut from that one entirely.

You don't need me to tell you this, but details are anathemic to punchiness, and so are going to be lost. If your idea is too complex for a single sentence, it's evidently not worth the listener's time.

## The odd relationship

Nothing in this little column is new to you. You know the generalist media chase ambulances and have no attention span without me telling you.

I'm mostly whining because before I started dealing with media folk on a regular basis, I didn't think that it would all be so *true*. Every time I deal with generalist media people, I feel pressure (often explicit) to round off details and say caustic and sensationalist things. When I get off the telephone or hit the *send* button, I fret about how the journalist at the other end is going to spin and simplify me until I disagree with myself.

So, am I going to stop talking to media folks and stop submitting oversimplified op-eds? Of course not. If I want Congress to do anything, or if I want to get grants or continue writing, I need media appearances. It's how we keep score. For many people, the mental shortcut to answer the question *is this person worth talking to?* is to reduce it to *has this person been published in/by something I've heard of?* The first question is about whether the person knows the topic in depth, while the second is about whether the person can convince an editor that he or she can summarize information for a general audience. But it is an ingrained heuristic, rooted in observation biases that one could characterize as basic human nature, and I can't imagine a future where such tendencies magically disappear.

So it's not going to go away. There will always be a need for generalist media,

and generalist media will always be better-recognized and more widely read than specialized media, and to maximize audiences they will chase ambulances and oversimplify. Further, people like me have a strong incentive to play along even though we really hate to, because so many people equate *widely-read* with *authoritative*.