

TIME

Wednesday, Feb. 20, 2008

Should Newspapers Still Be Taking Sides?

By Richard Stengel, Managing Editor

During the 1936 presidential campaign, the *Chicago Tribune*, under its archconservative owner, Colonel Robert McCormick, wholeheartedly endorsed the candidacy of the Republican Alf Landon. The paper was so vehemently anti-F.D.R. that 10 days before the election, switchboard operators at the newspaper answered the phone by saying "Hello. *Chicago Tribune*. Only 10 days left to save the American way of life."

In the next few weeks, newspapers in Ohio, Texas and Pennsylvania will endorse candidates for President. In fact, most of them will endorse both a Democrat and a Republican. In 2004, presidential candidates were endorsed by 418 newspapers across the country — 29% of all the papers in the U.S.

I confess that I've never quite understood why newspapers endorse presidential candidates. 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?

Young news consumers are suspicious about traditional authority. They prize objectivity, straightforwardness and transparency. I doubt there's a reader under 30 who gets why newspapers endorse presidential candidates — and most of the ones I talk to ask the following: How can a newspaper be objective on the front page when it endorses a candidate on the editorial page? They're dubious about whether the reporter who covers Hillary Clinton can be objective if his newspaper has endorsed Barack Obama — and vice versa. And they're right. At a time when newspapers are trying to ensure their survival by attracting younger readers, the idea of endorsements is both counterproductive and an anachronism. It's certainly the prerogative of newspapers and their owners to endorse candidates, but in doing so they are undermining the very basis for their business, which is impartiality. It's a recipe for having less influence, not more.

I want our writers and reporters to express a point of view in their stories. They're experts, they've done their homework, and I think it's fair for writers to suggest that after thoroughly reviewing the candidates' policies on health care, they find one more practical than another. That's transparency. Media outlets should publish editorials and take positions, but the vote for President is the most personal decision we make as citizens. No one wants to be told how to vote — and we make all kinds of judgments about the people who do.

Journalists love to cite the fact that the press is the only industry protected by the Constitution. A free press, as Jefferson noted, is part of our system of checks and balances; it is one of the few guarantors of democracy. But for the press to remain free, we need to preserve both the reality and the appearance of that freedom, and endorsements undermine that.