



# BROAD + LIBERTY

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## The changing place of the thoughtful op-ed

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On March 13, 2005, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published on its Commentary page an excerpt from “web pundit” Matthew Yglesias, in which he portends “The End of the Op-Ed.” He believed that these “short form” pieces will be replaced by the blogosphere. It was followed by twelve comments from readers of both blogs and traditional op-eds.

Thinking back then and several years thereafter, blogging was all the rage. In fact, newspapers would reprint what bloggers wrote in their online space and give credit as such in the author's byline.

Much has changed in traditional print newspapers since then and the online outlets for opinion pieces have expanded. Readers don't see bloggers' original work on the op-ed pages as much today. However, what readers see in the traditional op-ed space in some of today's major newspapers makes the question of the demise of the op-ed relevant.

For example, in the last couple of years the *Inquirer* runs only one to two op-ed pieces a day, whereas a major metro paper traditionally ran three to four op-eds a day. The change is striking, even to the casual reader of op-eds, as the readers of the print *Inquirer* today see an expanse of white space and uncharacteristically large photos, to fill the gap in this broadsheet's op-ed page.

Additionally, another change is that the *Inky's* editors have moved their columnists into this premium space, whereas before they would be in their respective focus area and appear as columnists (e.g., business, sports, politics, culture, city, etc.). Encroaching the space that traditionally is reserved for outside voices is not serving the readers, the public, and organizations from all three sectors (government, for-profit, and nonprofit) who can benefit from reading those authors who have something of value to say. It is taking the space away from authors who can give insight and perspective, and at times counterpoints to what has become the conventional thoughts and writings of almost all journalists, especially the editorials, today, *i.e.* liberal and left leaning and *carte blanche* support of anything partisanly Democrat.

In fairness to the opinion editors of the *Inky* and other newspapers, their budgets have been cut. Budget cuts mean less space for what is printed and fewer skillful eyes editing the many opinion pieces submitted. Budget cuts for this important area of the *Inquirer* means the token conservatives (national or local) must go. Consequently, the voice of the *Inky* is now a cacophony of left-leaning sounds coming from the editorial board statements, advocacy news reporting, and opinion writers.

Demarketing outside voices in what is considered the fourth largest media market in the US is not healthy for what opinion editors ostensibly want from op-ed submissions: open conversation, community input, insightful remarks, perspective, and civic engagement.

We should be reminded that the decisionmakers of any free and independent newspaper are free to put what they want into their newspaper. After all, it is their paper. True. However, along with this historical status comes privileges and these are given with the expectation they will act as the responsible Fourth Estate and be objective purveyors of the news. Unfortunately, this latter part of the social contract has been broken.

In the last eight years following the last three presidential elections, there has been a growing sense from news and opinion writers that journalists have lost their way, from how they are taught in the schools of journalism, trained, mentored, wrote, and rewarded. Public opinion on the respect and trust of traditional media, including print journalism, continues to fall. Losing trust of the public exacerbates the continuing decline in newspaper circulation and subsequent revenue.

When asked about the decline in the number of op-eds printed in newspapers today, a thoughtful and skilled opinion writer stated: “Let them [Op-Ed sections] die.” There is some hopeful reflection from national newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *L. A. Times*, that the nature and extent of their news reporting, columnists, and op-eds is way out of touch with many Americans — readers or otherwise.

What has evolved since Matthew Yglesias’s prediction that the op-ed writers will go the way of the blogosphere, is the advent of online commentary outlets — local and national. For example, one should at least be curious about [Broad + Liberty](#), which promotes “freedom of thought” and “innovative ideas, diverse and disruptive viewpoints, and positive policies that hit home for our readers, supporters and followers.” Clearly these founders saw the gap in op-eds written for Philadelphia and the region’s readers.

The [Delaware Valley Journal](#) published by Inside Sources looks to be filling the traditional role of newspapers “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” by paying close attention to who is influencing our public policy

today and bringing to the fore who are the winners and who are the losers. They post many op-eds from a range of writers and report “what they hear on the street,” which is useful in politics and discovering the rationale for the public policies they have to live with.

Some national online opinion outlets that have grown are Inside Sources’ *DC Journal* that is “elevating the debate” on public policy. [The Hill](#) is for policy wonks and beltway enthusiasts that are looking for more than the predictable copy coming from the *Washington Post* and *Associated Press*. The [American Thinker](#) welcomes op-ed writers “who have a concern for the complex and morally significant questions on the national agenda.”

Yglesias points out that blogs generally are put together hastily whereas the full-time staff writers at the paper (news beat or columnist), have the time, talent, and treasure to produce a quality and useful piece. Most op-ed writers do the same as a paper’s columnists and news reporters, *i.e.*, invest much time to write a thoughtful and useful piece for a range of readers. Alternative online commentary outlets that have evolved are proving Yglesias’s predication wrong.

Op-eds are not dying; they have moved to a different space. And this new space may be more influential than the long-standing newspapers that tout that they provide “all the news that’s fit to print.”

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