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The Ombudsman: Ever on Monday: In depth -- and controversial -- stories

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Monday morning newspapers tend to make you think. On Sundays government offices usually are closed, politicians take a break from speechmaking, and even crooks seem to stay home or sleep late - most of the time.

The front page is often less event-oriented, and more likely to examine a subject closely and in depth.

That isn't a matter of journalistic policy, according to The Bee's top editor, but of dealing with the reality of the weekend.

"We do try to have one Monday morning think piece," according to Executive Editor Rick Rodriguez, "and in fact, call it 'Monday morning.' But we also just have to plan more because there generally isn't a lot of breaking news over the weekend."

This past Monday's edition was a good example. Of the five stories on Page 1, not one was about an event. The subjects were timely, but not immediate: the impact of immigration, the evolution of the legal system as it deals with terrorism, a recapitulation of the government's dealings with a terrorist suspect, a military reservist's struggle with the possibility of being sent off to war and a report from The Bee's Washington Bureau chief on how people in Turkey view the potential for a U.S. war with Iraq.

Readers' reactions to this particular front page were mixed, but strong.

The biggest response came to the Page 1 "Monday morning" feature about a veteran National Guard member struggling with her conscience and her sense of duty.

One distant reader, Marine Staff Sergeant John M. Ellis, a reservist currently serving overseas, read the story online and did not like it at all. "It is a pathetic story that insults the rest of us who are over here doing our duty," he wrote.

Pete Ruff from Cameron Park was equally blunt: "This kind of claptrap belongs in Scene, not on the front page!"

Some readers thought the story reflected the dilemma facing a lot of soldiers and citizens these days, but most readers we heard from did not want to read about it.

But it certainly provoked them to think about the issues involved.

Responses to immigration

Then there was the story at the top of the front page that said, "Immigrants boost economy." That was a lengthy report based on an economic study at a Northeastern university.

Kim Berry of Citrus Heights claimed the story was "corporate-funded propaganda," and wanted "equal time" from The Bee to debate the constitutionality of immigration law. (His request was forwarded to the opinion pages.)

But reader Diane Mahoney, an attorney who practices immigration law, had a very different view. "I know from my own experience that it is absolutely true," she wrote, "and always has been. It's good to see the contributions of immigrants acknowledged in a positive way for a change, especially in these troubled times when most news stories focusing on immigrants involved bad news. Keep up the good work!"

Reader Jeff Kirsten from Folsom was prompted to write by the series of stories (like Monday's on Turkey) about the world's view of the U.S. He wanted to thank the editors and "to encourage more articles like it." Even the inside section pages reflected the Monday morning tendency to reflect, analyze or look forward.

The Metro section front page had four articles and a column. Only two were keyed to events from Sunday, and both of those were planned ceremonies. It wasn't until Page B5 that you would find two news events from Sunday, an ammonia leak and a fire.

The Sports section on Monday featured a detailed preview of the college basketball season, which prompted reader **Kim Callahan** to send in thanks for coverage of both men's and women's teams.

"I look forward to more articles on the area college teams as the season progresses. While we may not have any national powerhouses in our immediate area, many of us do follow the local basketball teams closely and it's nice to see some coverage in the newspaper." That's called positive reinforcement and it works pretty well on editors.

There was, incidentally, plenty of live sports news in the NFL Extra section and elsewhere in sports.

On some Mondays, readers call and question why a certain story was missed, usually something they heard about on television. But most readers appear to be satisfied with the idea that Mondays are different and if the paper makes you think about important issues, that satisfies their need for information.

Wanted, but anonymous

Newspaper policies don't always make sense to readers, as Andrew Conway pointed out this week after The Bee ran a story about a murder suspect but didn't use the suspect's name.

"I find the failure of The Bee to identify a teenager being sought by Sac PD in a double homicide interesting," he wrote. "This is a wanted person with a criminal history of assault, wanted in a double homicide and considered armed and dangerous ... it seems that the police need the help of the public and media in apprehending a dangerous person."

The Metro desk editor responded that the juvenile had not been charged with any crime at the time the story was written, and so the name was not used.

Comment: That doesn't make a lot of sense to me. The Bee routinely prints the names of people suspected of a crime when they are being sought by police. Given the serious nature of the crime, I think printing the name would have been a public service.

A different complaint

A couple of readers noticed that "The Boondocks" comic strip that ran in Saturday's newspaper was a reprint. A couple of people checked another newspaper and realized The Bee had not run the strip that was available for that day.

Why, asked Boondocks fan Loraine Krofchok, was it missing?

Executive Editor Rick Rodriguez, who has often defended Boondocks' satire and racial and political humor, made the decision not to publish the planned strip and to substitute an older one.

"Editors edit," he said. "I edited because I thought that one was unfair and inappropriate for the comics page," he said afterward.

Krofchok called that editing decision "censorship," and said the editors should have explained their reasoning the same day the strip ran.

Comment: Censorship is what happens when a government official prevents an individual from speaking or writing. Everything in this newspaper is edited, and the editor has the responsibility for making those decisions.

I support the idea of editors explaining to readers unusual decisions that affect content. But editing comics is not a new issue at The Bee. It is not practical for editors to use space to explain every time they elect to leave something out of the paper.

About the Writer

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