

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Editorials and opinion pieces are different than regular news stories. They are designed to share a perspective and influence beliefs.

Opinion pieces are easily found in most newspapers. The writers—often called columnists—will share their opinions on events of the day. For example, the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* and Regina *Leader-Post* feature regular columns by writers such as Doug Cuthand and Murray Mandryk, who offer valuable perspectives on current events.

Editorials are found in many newspapers. Editorials are unsigned articles written by the newspaper’s editorial board. Editorial boards oversee a newspaper or magazine’s general direction. Their editorials present the newspaper’s “official” opinion on a particular topic. Editorial beliefs are not supposed to directly influence the work of journalists.

The fair and open exchange of ideas in opinion columns and editorials is essential to democratic society. However, the line between journalism and opinion is becoming increasingly blurred.

NEWS OR OPINION?

At one time, editorials and opinion pieces were aired as special segments on TV and radio broadcasts, and placed on a dedicated page in newspapers. The segments were clearly marked as opinion pieces. Often this is no longer the case.

Many traditional media outlets and online news portals have shifted their focus from providing news to providing opinions. Writer Jonathan Schell has observed this trend. Citing Fox News as the worst offender, he wrote in *Project Syndicate* that:

news and commentary are mingled in an uninterrupted stream of political campaigning. Ideology trumps factuality. And major Republican figures, including possible contenders for the party’s presidential nomination, are hired as ‘commentators.’ Indeed, its specific genius has been to turn propaganda into a popular and financial success.

One reason for this shift is that most news organisations are businesses. Businesses try to maximise their profits. It costs less to broadcast opinions than to produce in-depth investigative journalism. Meanwhile, opinion articles and programs tend to be more popular than investigative journalism. As a result, many news organisations have shifted their focus from journalism to opinions.

Canada’s media tends to act more responsibly than its American counterparts. However, our media often focus on opinions, too. As an example, consider radio stations branded as news/talk. How much of what they broadcast is news? And how much of what they broadcast is opinions on the news?

To be sure, sharing opinions is vital for democracy. Nevertheless, professional journalists will try to provide a balanced perspective on the news of the day. Opinions-givers have no such obligation.

Because government generally does not and should not interfere with free expression in the media, it is our own responsibility to choose news, opinions, and other information responsibly. To do this, we need to be aware of the differences between journalism and opinions.



Discuss

1. Why do you think opinion-based programming is more popular than investigative journalism?
2. Find an opinion/editorial that appeared in Saskatchewan media.
 - a) Is it made clear to the audience that it is an opinion/editorial?
 - b) What is the topic?
 - c) What facts does the opinion/editorial use to support its stance?
 - d) Does the opinion piece give a balanced perspective on the issue?
3. Look more closely at your chosen opinion/editorial.
 - a) Who stands to benefit from its stance?
 - b) Who stands to be disadvantaged from its stance?
 - c) Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the piece, do you think it adds a valuable perspective to public debate?



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