



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

April 18, 2023

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Peter St. Onge, North Carolina Opinion Editor, The Charlotte Observer and The (Raleigh) News and Observer

by Elly Clary

The editorial page chief for three important North Carolina newspapers is seeking an outlook more diverse than old, white, and male.

“We want people to see their perspectives reflected on our pages,” said Peter St. Onge, the middle-aged Caucasian guy in charge. “I’m not just talking about racial diversity, I’m talking about gender, younger voices, and ideology.”

Based in Charlotte, St. Onge is North Carolina’s opinion editor for The Charlotte Observer, The (Raleigh) News & Observer, and The Durham Herald-Sun. All are owned by the McClatchy Company.

In recent years, the papers have hired younger writers and paid attention to more diversity of opinion on the opposite editorial pages and in letters to the editor, he said.

For the three publications, he said, a recently instituted community advisory board includes people with conservative views. The editorial staffs invite people to share their views before writing opinion pieces. And they ask community leaders what is going on that the papers haven’t written about.

St. Onge realizes the editorial board for the Observer and the two papers in the Triangle leans left, he admitted by way of explaining how they have

tried to diversify ideologically. Paid columnists now write regularly with a right-center perspective. These include Pat Ryan, former spokesperson for NC Senate leader Phil Berger, and Mick Mulvaney, who was chief of staff for President Donald Trump.

“We want to challenge ourselves as an editorial board,” St. Onge said. “We want readers to challenge themselves with perspectives that they don’t necessarily share.”

After sharing his belief that the papers are getting better at this, he opened the floor to questions. His answers, including his quotes, follow.

- There’s no hard data on political leanings in Mecklenburg County, although it’s “a bluer dot in a redder state. A significant portion of our (Charlotte Observer) readers are conservative so we want to meet those readers.”
- The Observer uses artificial intelligence as a research tool. “I don’t think AI will supplant reporters or opinion journalists.”
- The editorial department seeks to publish letters to the editor in proportion to the volume received on either side of an issue. “We do put a thumb on the scale for perspectives we don’t share ourselves.”
- He hopes people see the Observer as well-reported and fair. The paper is not perfect but aspires to be.
- Political endorsements are among the topics people ask about most, including those for judgeships. “We do endorse in most judicial races.”
- On editorial content in news accounts, “there are fewer defined lines than there used to be. The best we can do is make sure readers understand what they are getting.”
- The “Great State of Mecklenburg” perception does exist statewide. “We think North Carolina as a whole doesn’t recognize Mecklenburg and Wake counties for the economic drivers that they are. We definitely have written about that and we’re going to continue to do it.”
- Traditionally, headlines were written by a person other than the story’s author. Now, it’s often a collaborative effort.
- Subscription rates that discourage younger people are a product of newspapers adjusting to market realities. “Subscription in a digital world is going to be the part that sustains newspapers more than anything else.”
- The editorial staff wants to address topics while people are talking about them. “Attention spans among readers, young and old, are just not what they were before.”

- The McClatchy newspapers in North Carolina combined editorial boards, in part, because “we wanted to think not just Charlotte-centric but North Carolina and Charlotte region-centric.”

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/818881470>

The program introduction begins at 19:15 minutes.