

WORTH PURSUING? AN ANALYSIS INTO THE RELEVANCE OF THE
NEWSPAPER ENDORSEMENT

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ANALYSIS

**You Should Definitely, Probably, Maybe Still Issue That Newspaper Endorsement
Many Still See a Value in Newspaper Endorsements, Though Just How Relevant or
Worthwhile it is to Pursue One May Depend on Who You are Talking to**

I feel like I'm never going to stop thinking about the 2016 presidential election. I will occasionally be transported back to election night and relive the pure shock I felt once the race was called. I have a feeling I am not the only journalist who feels this way. Immediately after the election ended, I read take after take where journalists asked themselves, after months of polls and speculation, how could we "the media" have predicted the result so incorrectly? These articles cited polling numbers. They cited previous candidates where lesser scandals brought them down. They also cited newspaper endorsements.

If newspaper endorsements elected presidents, Hillary Clinton would be in the White House. She received an overwhelming number of endorsements, with even normally conservative papers endorsing her and USA Today issuing a non-endorsement of Donald Trump. However, endorsements do not equal election victories, and the fact that Trump is our president made me wonder not if newspaper endorsements are influential, but if people care they are written at all. This led to a personal quest of trying to find out what people really think about newspapers endorsements and media influence.

If I wanted to try to answer this question, I needed to talk to more than just those in the newspaper business. I also needed to look at this question from a more local perspective. While Clinton and Trump may be the reason why I became interested in this topic, newspapers endorse more than presidents. In the end, I talked to editors, politicians, professors in communication and politics and a political advisor all in the state of Missouri about newspaper endorsements, if candidates still seek them out, if technology has affected their influence, and if the practice of issuing them should even continue. After conducting these interviews and seeing the similarities and differences in my interviewees' answers, I have come to some realizations about endorsements, and how technology has changed elections and campaigns forever.

How relevant an endorsement is depends who you ask.

I began my interviews by asking: just how much do campaigns value newspaper endorsements? The answers I received to this question, and all of my questions after that, greatly varied depending on who was talking. More often than not, I found that those who shared professions shared similar viewpoints. Unsurprisingly, those in the media business were resolute: candidates definitely value the newspaper endorsement. Not only that, in the case of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, candidates frequently ask to meet with the editorial board in hopes of being featured in the paper. Tod Robberson, the editor of the editorial section for the St. Louis Post Dispatch, says what he sees at the paper defies the current belief that endorsements matter less than they used to.

“We find ourselves inundated with requests from candidates, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, you name it, to meet with us. And they get very upset when we won't meet with them,” Robberson said.

Considering the St. Louis Post Dispatch is one of the largest papers in the state of Missouri, with a circulation rate of 172,822 and over 218,000 likes on Facebook, it makes sense that this particular paper would be in demand for endorsements. However, this belief that candidates value the endorsement continued with those involved with smaller papers as well.

Steve Booher, the news director of the St. Joseph News Press Gazette, a paper with a circulation rate of 24,382 and over 24,000 Facebook likes, said that candidates ask whether or not the paper is going to endorse them. Booher believes the endorsement is another feather in a candidate's cap they can advertise.

In Columbia, Missouri, Hank Waters III, the editorial writer and former owner of The Columbia Tribune, a paper with a circulation of 17,875 and over 14,800 likes on Facebook, noted how the party of the candidate may affect how badly they may want an endorsement.

“If they think that I have the reputation as a liberal and they're very conservative, they're not going to be as interested in it. But in our particular case we've always tried to be objective, and we will agree with one side or the other,” Waters said.

Dr. Mitchell McKinney, a professor of communications, believes that campaigns valued the newspaper endorsement. He had a similar answer to Booher, believing that these endorsements are great advertisement fodder for political campaigns and candidates.

However, when talking to Jonathan Ratliff, a political consultant who mainly works with conservative candidates, sees it differently.

“I would say it doesn't matter a lot to me because most of the time newspapers don't endorse my candidate, but I still win,” Ratliff said.

Politicians value the endorsement more than you think.

Other than a campaign manager or a political consultant, the individuals who could give me the most direct answer to whether or not campaigns value the newspaper endorsements are politicians, all of whom were candidates first.

There was consensus among the politicians I interviewed that the endorsement mattered at least a little bit. However, Missouri House Representative Pat Conway, a Democrat who represents the St. Joseph area, says over the 30 years he has been involved in politics, he has seen the value of the endorsement decrease. He cited the ability of readers to get their news at other outlets instead of relying on the paper as one reason for this shift.

Missouri State Senator Caleb Rowden, a Republican who represents Boone County (including Columbia, Missouri), also thinks the value of the endorsement has changed, but believes an established newspaper still can influence voters.

“I still think there is value, and certainly in mid-Missouri where the Tribune endorsement has carried some weight in some cases,” Rowden said. However, when asked if his campaigns put out effort to gain an endorsement, he said it was not the top priority of his campaign. While he does meet with Waters during campaign season, in his experience he does not expect the endorsement, so he is not going to work particularly hard for it.

Representative Kip Kendrick, a Democrat representing parts of Columbia, ran unopposed during his first election and against an independent in his second election. Even though Kendrick’s races are not necessarily competitive, he still values newspaper endorsements. However, like Rowden, Kendrick said he focused more on knocking on doors and building name recognition than nabbing an endorsement during his first election. Despite this, Kendrick does value Waters’ opinion.

“One time in particular I filed a bill a couple years ago...an ethics bill that Hank Waters called me out on in an editorial, and I value his opinion so much and his editorials that I, after he put out the editorial, I called him to talk to him about it,” Kendrick said.

While it was reassuring to hear the politicians I interviewed overall speak in favor of the endorsement and of the press in general, I can’t say I was too surprised by Rowden’s and Kendrick’s answers. Since Columbia is home to the University of Missouri and its journalism school, journalism and reporting are a huge part of Columbia’s identity, which may make Kendrick and Rowden value the press more than other Missouri representatives would.

Where and when an election is may affect an endorsement’s influence.

When I was asking about the importance of the election, the idea of the size of the race making a difference in an endorsement’s relevance repeatedly came up during my interviews.

The overall belief from those I interviewed was that the smaller and less advertised the race, the more important the endorsement became. Elections in smaller towns or at least areas with less media coverage, could benefit from a press endorsement. Dr. James Endersby, a political science professor at the University of Missouri, has little faith that a newspaper endorsement has any impact on the presidential election, but in a local election, the endorsement could make a difference in the result. This also included races where a candidate does not run on a political party, such as school board or judge elections.

“When you don't have a party label on the ballot, if you don't have a recognized incumbent or something, the campaign needs to show that there is a real viable candidate behind there, and that's where they may have a greater impact,” Endersby said.

Waters also brought up the notion that the size of the election makes a difference, with candidates caring more about an endorsement when the smaller the race. Waters said his

longtime tradition of issuing endorsements has created a relationship between himself and longtime readers.

Even, Ratliff, who normally spends little effort working towards getting a newspaper endorsement, said smaller races possibly gain more from a paper endorsement. With these smaller races, Ratliff at minimum makes sure his candidate has a working relationship with the press.

Where the election is taking place and the size of it are not the only factors that may make a newspaper endorsement more influential. When the endorsement happens could help as well. Robberson refrains from endorsing any candidate in the St. Louis Post Dispatch during the primary stage, mainly because there are just too many candidates at that point.

“I will get a phone call from a campaign manager saying, when do you start interviewing candidates for this primary race? And I normally will tell them, ‘Look, we are a small staff, and almost certainly will not endorse in the primaries except in very exceptional circumstances.’”

While Robberson said he doesn’t normally issue endorsements during the primary stage, according to Endersby, that’s when some candidates may want the endorsement.

“Not many editorial boards were endorsing at the time of the Republican presidential primaries, but that’s the stage where they can have a bigger impact,” Endersby said.

For Rowden, a Republican, an endorsement during the primary stage could hurt his campaign.

“Because the Tribune is perceived to lean left, and for me as a Republican if I’m trying to win a Republican primary, having a left leaning entity endorse me may not be a good thing, right?” Rowden said. However, once the campaign turns to the general election, Rowden said an

endorsement would more likely help him get elected. Overall, the demographic and timing factors surrounding an election could greatly change how influential an endorsement is.

Candidates now must juggle traditional media and new media during campaigns.

As I received answer after answer about the waning influence of the endorsement, the natural question to ask was: how else are campaigns reaching out to voters? The answer? Social media. With the national conversations about Facebook's influence in the election, to Missouri's governor using Facebook Live to announce policies as opposed to going through news conferences, social media and the influences of those you know are now a major strategy with elections. This discussion on social media also prompted the question of who is more influential, newspaper endorsements, or endorsements from people you personally know?

Rowden, who said his own campaign spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on social media, said this strategy should be used to a candidate's advantage. He noted President Trump's tendency to use Twitter frequently to reach out to his base.

"It would be foolish of somebody like that, who has an audience that big, not to take advantage of it in some way," Rowden said. However, Rowden also believes this particular strategy should not be used purely to avoid or devalue the media.

Campaign advisor Ratliff has seen this strategy work to his advantage. While he says he still introduces his candidates to local media and wants them to have a friendly relationship with the press, he would much rather put out his own content and connect with people that way.

"I think I can do a much better job having a direct conversation with people, as a Republican especially," Ratliff said. Another perk to this strategy is that it costs less than the traditional method of paying for ads. According to Ratliff, the \$2,500 a full-page ad costs at the Tribune could go a lot further with social media use. As far as who is more influential, he was

resolute in his opinion that the opinion of someone you know matters more than a newspaper endorsement.

Even though Robberson sees many campaigns try to win an election just by using social media alone and even sees the appeal of it for smaller elections, he does not believe it is an effective strategy.

“Ultimately to start off with that antagonistic relationship by saying, we don't need your endorsement, we don't want it, we can win without you....’ You want to do it that way, go for it. I have yet to see it work to the candidate’s advantage,” Robberson said.

Booher of the St. Joseph News Press echoed that there are benefits to going around the press. He sees why relaying your campaign messages without going through a second party such as an editorial board could be appealing.

“With social media, for the most part you can control the message. If you interview with a newspaper editorial board or even with a reporter, you can't just say what you want. Your comments are going to be vetted and your comments are going to be verified. And on social media, none of that necessarily happens,” Booher said. Booher was also the only media person I interviewed that believed that the endorsement of someone you know is probably more influential than a newspaper endorsement, stating that the anonymity of some endorsements causes readers to speculate who exactly is making those decisions.

Representative Conway agreed that there appears to be a shift to websites such as Facebook or Twitter for media consumption. However, Conway also brought up a new idea: that there could also be a shift of people withdrawing themselves from public debate. In Conway’s eyes, some people have withdrawn from the constant barrage of news that occurs every day, and he is not sure how to attract those people back to the voting booth.

From a communication perspective, there are a lot of factors that have influenced the shift toward social media, according to McKinney. The downsizing and decline of newspapers is one factor; another is the overall shift of news consumption from print to online. As far as which is more influential, McKinney believes people you know carry more weight. He said that for newspapers to be influential, someone has to already be a subscriber to that newspaper, and with readership down, fewer people are getting that information.

Endersby believes, barring a major scandal, any free press tends to be positive press for a campaign. However, that does not mean that a candidate can solely pick one strategy over the other.

“You need some kind of media...even if it’s putting up yard signs and trying to get on the local radio, but at the same time you have some kind of face to face contact for all these campaigns, that’s where it’s more effective,” Endersby said. Despite acknowledging that campaigns need to pursue both strategies, he leaned more toward social networks as being more influential because people tend to vote the same way as their peers do. When someone exists in a social media bubble where a different opinion may not be circulated as much, it makes sense that a newspaper may not be able to break into that bubble. However, Endersby also said that the research on this topic is vague.

Echoing Endersby, Kendrick also believes that pursuing both strategies is important for a campaign’s success. He sees the obvious appeal in being able to control your message and speaking directly to voters. He also believes building trust in a community would often earn an endorsement anyway.

“You have to put out the effort to earn the trust of individuals, and I think any fair minded editorial board or anyone who’s going to put out an endorsement, if you have their trust

and if they see that you're committed to serving the public, that's how you earn the endorsement," Kendrick said. He believes the newspaper endorsement is critical because it may reach the constituent whose door hadn't been knocked on yet.

The endorsement is not the only useful political shortcut.

Newspaper endorsements are helpful to voters because, as Robberson puts it, they put in the time to learn as much as they can about candidates because their readers don't have the same amount of time to do so. Information that could take a decent amount of internet surfing, is printed all in one place and saves the reader time and energy on thinking about who to vote for.

These time saving methods are sometimes called information shortcuts. I asked if there were shortcuts, such as endorsements, that could be valuable to a campaign or to a voter? It turns out, the endorsement is not the only shortcut that can be useful to campaigns. Furthermore, shortcuts can be useful to media outlets as well.

Other than his endorsements, Waters talked about a voting guide that he writes before an election that rounds up and lists all of his endorsement for that particular election season. According to Waters, this guide helps voters because it eliminates the work of searching through the Columbia Tribune's website and tracking those endorsements down.

For his own use, Robberson stated that campaign websites as shortcuts are helpful to him because at times they are a good quick source of information that he can use to write endorsements because perhaps the editorial board did not get enough time with the candidate during the interview.

For the lawmakers, talking points came up frequently as a shortcut that they find useful to their campaigns. Having a sound bite on an issue that a candidate keeps talking about helps them stay on message and also makes that message fairly known to the public.

One of the most interesting points brought up about this idea came from Rowden, saying that one example of an information shortcut is fear mongering. Candidates can take a complicated issue and boil it down to a single talking point that can alarm constituents.

He said that when examining really large, complex issues, there are always going to be extreme circumstances that support one argument. These extreme instances are a way for some politicians to boil down a complex policy to something alarmingly and sometimes inaccurately more simple.

Ratliff went even simpler, saying that the party of a candidate is the only shortcut a voter needs to know who to vote for.

The relationship between the press and candidates or politicians has changed, but that does not make the media irrelevant.

In addition to asking specifically about the newspaper endorsement and why it may be less relevant today than in the past, I wanted to get a larger sense of the relationship between the media and campaigns today. How has the relationship changed, and has the media become less relevant in elections? It's impossible to deny that social media and technology has changed how campaigns are run or how newspapers cover elections. However, while candidates may have new ways to circumvent the media, many believed the media still plays a valuable role in elections.

While Waters believes that papers have become less relevant in elections with one major factor being a decrease in readership in general, personally, he says he hasn't seen a decrease in politicians who are willing to talk to him for the purpose of an endorsement.

As someone who does go through the process of talking to Waters, Rowden believes that the media is a little less relevant. He also believes that the current relationship between the press and candidates will balance itself out and that he wants the relationship to get better. As far as

how long it will take for the relationship to change, that depends on who is in power next. Even then, Rowden believes some of the methods used to circumvent the media now will probably be reworked in the future, no matter who is in power.

Robberson believes that the relationship between campaigns and newspapers have changed for the worse, but that some politicians and campaigns still respect the opinions of the paper. As far as the relevancy of the paper endorsement, it's as strong as ever.

Ratliff disagreed and reiterated his earlier beliefs, saying candidates who are not inclined to meet with an editorial team either due to nerves or a bad past experience with the press, now do not have to. They don't need to make themselves vulnerable or care what a reporter has to say.

The only person I talked to who was just as confident as the editorial editor of the Post Dispatch about the relevancy of the press was Representative Kendrick.

"I think that's part of the reason why so many candidates seek to control the message and shut out the press and speak directly to people, is that they want to be able to tell their story because they're afraid of what story's going to be told, and I think that that shows the relevancy of the press more than anything else," Kendrick said.

McKinney agreed with the idea that there is an antagonistic relationship between the press and politicians, but said that's how it should be. To him, that element of the press has not changed no matter how technology has evolved, and he hopes that it remains that way because media organizations need to serve as a check on politicians.

The Ultimate Question: To Endorse, or not to Endorse.

Finally, at the end of each of my interviews, I asked *the* question. The one I'd been waiting to ask all along: Should newspapers continue the practice of the newspaper endorsement? The answer?

Yes.

Probably.

If they want to.

Okay, so in no way did I get a clear-cut answer on this. The majority of those I talked to said that newspapers should continue to endorse candidates. All three politicians believe the endorsement should still be printed in papers.

Not surprisingly, the media folks I talked to also believed the endorsement should still continue. While he doesn't give it much thought, Ratliff believed endorsements should continue if newspapers believe they were impactful.

As far as to the degree of how much it matters, that depends on who you talk to. I think the best summary of my findings comes from McKinney.

"I think they will continue. Whether they should, they've got to write something right?"

After listening to my interviewees, all of whom work on a more statewide scale than a national scale, my thoughts have gone back to the 2016 election. One of the largest takeaways I learned during this project is that the scale of an election more than likely affects the relevancy or effectiveness of an endorsement. Repeatedly my interviewees stated that low-information markets, or races that may not get as much coverage as larger races, might benefit more from the endorsement from the press. The presidency is the largest stage possible for an election. While maybe one paper is covering a school board election, most of the time a voter cannot escape coverage of a presidential candidate. Therefore, they have a greater opportunity to make up their

own mind on who they want to vote for, and no endorsement is going to make that much of a difference. While the number of endorsements Clinton received may have been newsworthy, that does not mean they changed any minds.

The other topic I've thought about since my interviews is the relationship between media institutions and politicians. I was not surprised to hear editors, those in politics and professors tell me how the relationship between the press and those who are elected has soured a little bit. That claim is very apparent when looking at the White House and the popularization of the term "fake news." However, what I was surprised at was the admission that despite the rise of social media, the impact and relevancy of traditional media outlets remains. Almost everyone I talked to, including all three politicians, agreed on the importance of the press, with one saying he hopes the relationship shifts back to one that is more amicable. So, the argument that the media is irrelevant when covering politicians or elections is inaccurate when looking at a local scale

If I had more time to conduct more interviews, there are some further concepts I would have liked to explore and more people I would have liked to talk with.

I'll admit that my interview subjects are very white and very male. Some of that could not be avoided, as all of the newspaper employees in charge of editorials were white men. Availability was another factor that influenced who I interviewed. Overall, a women's perspective or the perspective of a person of color would have been highly valuable to my project and may have differed from everyone else I talked to.

Another person I would have loved to talk to is a candidate that does not have a party listed next to their name on a ballot. As political consultant John Ratliff said, someone's political party serves as an information shortcut to voters. If a voter does not know the specific policies of a candidate, the D or R next to their names could be enough for a voter to make their decision.

However, for a candidate running in a non-party election such as a school board position, there is no shortcut for voters to use. In this case, would a candidate find a newspaper endorsement more valuable since it means more exposure? I do not know the answer in this case, but interviewing someone who currently resides on a school board would be a valuable source.

During my project I interviewed people involved in politics, academics and newspaper industry men. However, I did not interview any voters, the people whom candidates want to reach and whom newspapers hope their editorials influence. A source that could have been valuable to talk to is a voter, possibly a community organizer, or someone else equally aware of their local politics. Asking them if endorsements influence their voting habits would have been a great source of information that this project lacks.

Finally, another idea I would have explored if given more time is whether newspaper endorsements lead to further polarization of voters. This topic came up when I talked about the influence of social media and whether a personal endorsement would be more influential than a newspaper endorsement. However, I would like to go a little more in depth into whether newspaper endorsements only reach those who already value the press and that an endorsement only enforces the idea that the newspaper is reliable if they endorse your candidate or are biased if they do not. This polarization of the editorial pages can lead to the assumption that an entire paper is biased depending on its coverage.

Throughout my interviews, I was told plenty of reasons as to why a candidate should find the endorsement worth pursuing. Any press, barring a major scandal, is good for a candidate because it gets your name out there to the public. Newspapers may just reach that voter that a candidate did not meet personally. If you're an editor or a reporter of a statewide or local paper, your opinions might matter more than the national results would have you believe, since smaller

racers mean less coverage, meaning a single endorsement may be impactful. Furthermore, some candidates and politicians truly believe in the value of the press and think endorsements are still worth conducting, even if the papers do not endorse them.

However, I also got answers that make me believe newspaper endorsements are fast losing relevance. With the emergence of social media, money and time spent online could reach a larger audience than an endorsement ever would. Additionally, with social media, a candidate avoids the tough questions of an editorial board and relays his or her own messages to voters directly. The matter of a decline in readership was also brought up as evidence that the endorsement should not continue.

In the end, I cannot offer a definitive decision on whether or not newspapers should endorse a candidate. It appears as though the relevancy of the endorsement changes depending on who you talk to, and that is a fact I do not expect will change in years to come.