

BUSINESS DAILY

Is the Op-Eds space really worth it?

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Tony Watima

On September 21, 1970, the New York Times announced that it would be introducing a new page opposite the Editorial Page designed to provide an intellectual arena to provoke new ideas and discussion on public policies.

That is how modern op-ed which means “opposite the Editorial” debuted. The New York Times intentioned to create a forum to host a variety of outside experts to articulate their arguments and engage in exchange and clash of ideas for the benefit of the general public and even raised prices of its paper forecasting that such debates will help and even increase its readership.

I found this piece of history lesson in a paper titled “The Long-lasting Effects of Newspaper Op-Eds on Public Opinion” published on the Journal of Political Science in 2018 and it sought to answer the question as to whether Op-Ed has lived up to the dream of the New York Times in 1970.

The paper first looks at how large and sophisticated Op-Ed industry has developed and unforeseen sectors dependently plug-in. The first is thinktanks who are in fact employing dedicated teams of staff whose job is to edit and place Op-Eds in the newspapers. For example, in 2015, Cato Institute — a US-based thinktank — published a total of 944 Op-Eds, with 73 of those being in the top 10 newspapers. In the same year, Brookings Institute had 116 Op-Eds in top publications, whilst the American Enterprise Institute had 3,385.

It was interesting to know that big companies in the US also employ Op-Ed writing teams dedicated for that medium of communication. Then there are the PR companies which are engaged by organisations that do not have their own Op-Ed writing teams. In the US many PR firms contract former opinion editors of national newspapers to write for their clients as ghost-writers at very lucrative fees that range from \$5,000 to \$25,000 depending on the type of work.

Though it is said that people may selectively choose the content they read and skip over Op-Eds, especially with titles or authors that they find boring or that they anticipate will conflict with their existing points of view, the Op-Ed section has developed into its own industry.

Now, what informed the research paper was that there are many sceptical views about modern Op-Eds achieving the initial vision set out by the New York Times 50 years ago, which is enhancing debate and inform the public on substantive policy matters. Average readers might be ill-informed and unable to grasp detailed policy subjects. On the other hand, Op-Eds are being considered as content for elites but even they have not wholly embraced them — they tend to resist information that conflicts with their partisan identities.

So, do Op-Eds change the mind of people who read them?

First, the research established that Op-Eds have long-lasting effects on attitudes among both elites and members of the mass public.

Second, Op-Eds are remarkably cost-effective. From an analysis of the cost of producing an Op-Ed, the number of people who read it and the probability of changing a reader's mind, they found that the cost-per-mind changed per newspaper Op-Ed (which is the indicator being measured) ranged from approximately 50 cents to 3 dollars. This means Op-Eds are a cheaper medium for persuasion.

Third, the paper also established that long-form opinion pieces have the ability to change minds of even ideological opponents and contribute to the growing body of evidence of the everyday nature of persuasion even though they typically reach fewer than half of the total readership of the newspaper. In the US, 0.2 percent of the adult population reads even the most widely shared and successful opinion piece. So, if only 10 percent of those readers change their minds, the aggregate opinion change will shift by 0.02 percent. From a political lens, this is an impressive impact.