



Top Op-Ed Pages Offer Choice of Elites

On reigning issues, convergent perspectives

By **Nick Porter**

While it would be naive to accept the newspaper business's implication that it keeps its news entirely factual by segregating opinion to its own section, the op-ed pages do state opinion more explicitly and help make visible the range of opinions allowed in the rest of the paper.

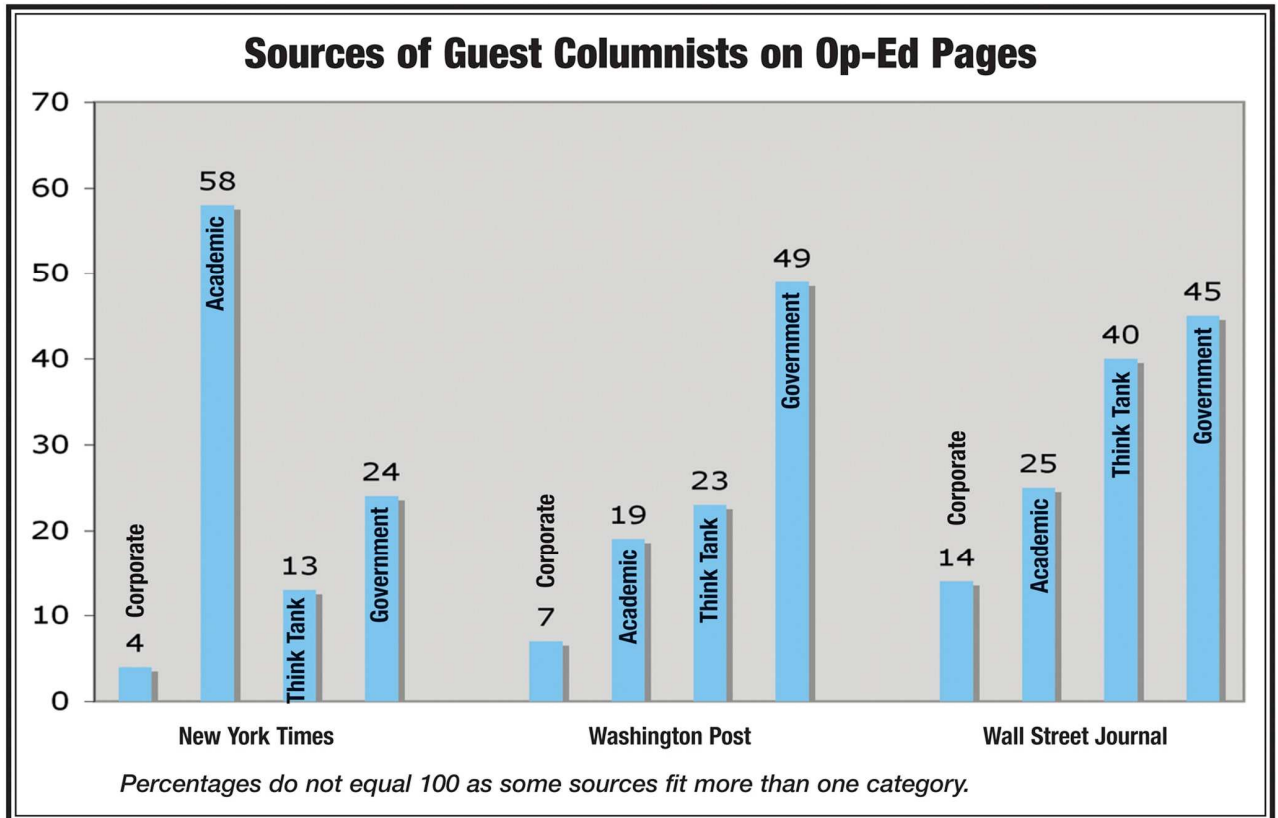
What kind of writers do the major papers put on their staff? Who gets to speak on these pages, and who gets left out? **Extra!** looked at the writers represented on the op-ed pages of three major, nationally significant newspapers: the **New York Times**, **Washington Post** and **Wall Street Journal**.

The time frame was a two-month period—September/October 2011—when the voices of the underrepresented majority, as embodied by the Occupy Wall Street movement, were making a very public call for their share of attention.

The study tracked all op-ed columns, written by both regular columnists and guests. Writers were classified by ethnicity, gender and occupational affiliations. Articles that addressed economic themes and the OWS movement were looked at separately as case studies.

In total, 739 columns in the three papers were surveyed, written by 362 guest writers and 421 staff columnists. The **Times** split duties most evenly, with 154 bylines coming from staff and 117 from guests. The **Journal** favored guest writers (155 to 69) and the **Post** favored staffers (198 to 90).

Make way for the elites. **Extra!** (e.g., [9-10/06](#), [11/10](#)) has long documented corporate media's preference for elite sources—voices that represent powerful institutions like government, big business, academia and think tanks. Guest columnists in the study came overwhelmingly from these fields—representing 84 percent of bylines in the **Times**, 84 in the **Journal** and 73 in the **Post**. However, the dominant type of elite varied from paper to paper.



Academics were the go-to source for the **New York Times**, accounting for 58 percent of guest bylines and covering everything from foreign policy to the domestic economy to obesity. This makes for an opinion page with more diversity of subject matter—e.g., Amish-on-Amish violence (10/21/11) and the underrated beauty of doubles tennis (9/10/11)—but results in political arguments that are often oblique and less prescriptive.

The University of Virginia’s Farzaneh Milani (10/7/11), for example, presented an alternative to the racist depictions of the turban as head-wear for terrorists: “According to a number of authoritative Islamic narratives, all major religious figures, beginning with Adam, were turbaned. So were the angels. Islamic painting abounds in depictions of prophets, kings, and political dignitaries whose crowns of hair are fully covered.”

Think tank writers were used more sparingly by the **Times** than by the other two papers, providing 13 percent of guest bylines; nine out of 15 came from centrist think tanks, four from conservative groups and two from progressive groups. Government officials (current and former, domestic and foreign) were used 24 percent of the time, while corporate-affiliated writers only contributed 4 percent of bylines.

The **Wall Street Journal** didn’t hedge its political leanings. The paper has always had an emphatically conservative op-ed page, and the current study confirms its reputation. Think tank writers provided 40 percent of the paper’s guest bylines, 77 percent of whom represented conservative, corporate-friendly institutions. The Hoover Institution and the

American Enterprise Institute were the two most heavily represented entities on the **Journal's** opinion page, accounting for 20 percent of all guest op-eds and leading the drumbeat of a heavily right-wing agenda on a whole range of issues: the failures of the Obama presidency (9/1/11, 9/8/11), market-oriented solutions for everything (9/22/11), unregulated drilling and fracking (9/30/11) and so on.

Government officials wrote 45 percent of guest op-eds, with Republicans outnumbering Democrats 47 to 8. The **Journal** featured the most corporate sources of the three papers, at 14 percent, while academics contributed 25 percent of bylines.

The **Washington Post**, true to its Inside-the-Beltway focus, featured government officials' opinions in 49 percent of its guest op-eds (19 Republicans, 19 Democrats, three independents)—more than double the share given to the paper's next most prominent writers, think tank representatives (23 percent). The **Post's** think tank writers leaned right, with 33 percent conservative, 48 percent centrist and 19 percent progressive. Academic and corporate sources were the least represented, with 19 percent and 7 percent respectively.

Public advocacy writers—representing labor, religious and activist groups across the political spectrum—accounted for only 12 percent of guest columnists in the **Post**, 4 percent in the **Journal** and 3 percent in the **Times**.

More elites in the stable
Of course, staff columnists in the mainstream press inhabit the same privileged social strata as government officials and academics. More important than each paper's particular ideological constellation of staff writers is the socioeconomic milieu in which they coexist, and there is much cross-pollination between outlets to prove it.

The **New York Times** tends to reward career journalists with columnist positions on the op-ed page. Bill Keller, Thomas Friedman, Maureen Dowd, Roger Cohen, Nicholas Kristof and Frank Bruni were all **Times** veterans prior to their columnist positions; Gail Collins (**Newsday**) and Joe Nocera (**Fortune**) had notable careers elsewhere in journalism before joining the **Times**.

The paper also hires writers for their conservative bona fides: David Brooks wrote for the **Washington Times**, served as opinion editor for the **Wall Street Journal** and as senior editor at the **Weekly Standard**, and Ross Douthat had contributed to the **Weekly Standard**, **Wall Street Journal** and **National Review**. Paul Krugman is notable both for his history as a well-respected economist and his constant reinforcement of progressive principles.

The **Wall Street Journal**, per its reputation, stocks its opinion page with credentialed right-wingers from various backgrounds. Stephen Moore worked for both Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation, and was president of Club for Growth. William McGurn was a speechwriter for George W. Bush, while Peggy Noonan wrote most of Bush's father's best

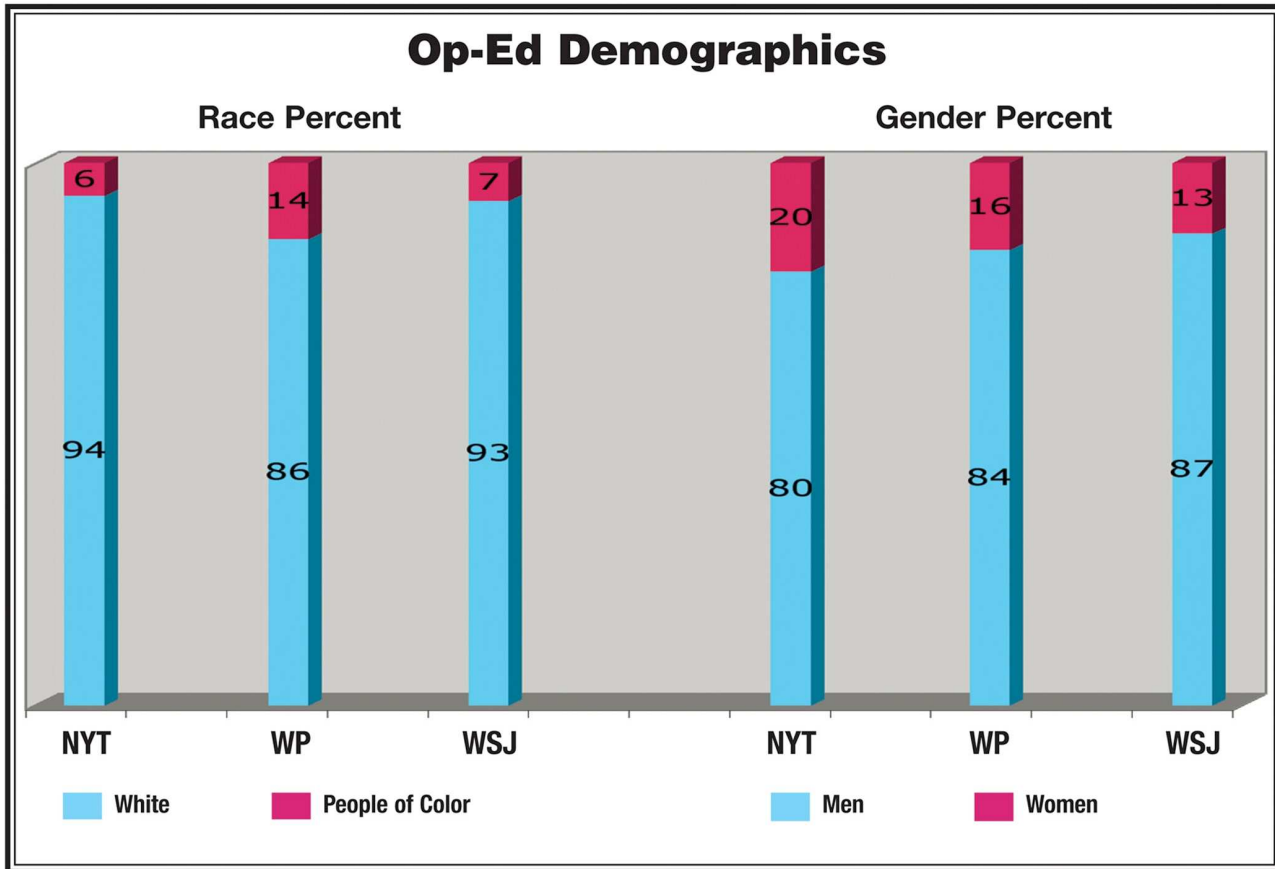
lines. Mary O'Grady was a finance industry insider at Meryl Lynch and co-edits the Index of Economic Freedom (a joint project of the **Journal** and the Heritage Foundation). Others cut their teeth in major right-wing media outlets: Daniel Henninger is a contributor to **Fox News**, and Holman Jenkins Jr. wrote for the **National Review** and Heritage's **Policy Review** journal.

The **Washington Post** markets its opinion page as a mix of left- and right-leaning thinkers and pulls from a varied range of backgrounds. Dana Milbank, though on the **Post's** "left-leaning" team, has written for the **New Republic** and **Wall Street Journal**. Michael Gerson was employed at the right-wing Heritage Foundation and was George W. Bush's speechwriter before McGurn of the **Journal**. Conservative pillars George Will (**National Review**) and Charles Krauthammer (**Weekly Standard, New Republic, Fox News**) also came from political posts.

David Ignatius spent time at the **Journal** and has written for the **New Republic**, while Ruth Marcus, E.J. Dionne and Eugene Robinson are veteran **Post** journalists, as is Jackson Diehl who started at the **Post** in 1978. Anne Applebaum is a veteran journalist who has put time in at a number of conservative outlets, including the **Spectator** and **Daily Telegraph**. Harold Meyerson is considered one of the **Post's** most progressive commentators, with an eclectic journalistic background (**American Prospect, LA Weekly**) and experience in politics as aide to Eugene McCarthy and work with the Democratic Socialists of America.

Latinos, women of color need not apply
Despite any ideological differences, the **Post, Journal** and **Times** have a strong affinity in their racial and gender homogeneity, a trend FAIR has consistently documented in corporate media (**Extra!**, [5-6/05](#), [9-10/06](#)). Among American writers, whites dominated opinion,

constituting 91 percent of total bylines. The **Times** was the least diverse at 94 percent white, but nearly matched by the **Journal** at 93 percent; the **Post**, which has two African-American regular columnists (Eugene Robinson and Colbert I. King) and one Asian-American (Fareed Zakaria), was the most diverse, at 86 percent white.



African-Americans were the most frequently represented minorities in the study period, at 11 percent in the **Post**, 4 percent in the **Times** and only 1 percent in the **Journal**. Excluding op-eds penned by regular columnists, the **Post**'s number drops to 8 percent and the **Times**' to 2 percent; the **Journal** hosts a uniformly white stable of regular columnists.

Though Latinos make up 16 percent of the U.S. population, they were granted less than half a percent of the op-ed bylines at the nation's top newspapers, authoring two columns in the **Times** and one in the **Wall Street Journal**—which featured right-wing Tea Party favorite Florida Sen. Marco Rubio (10/7/11). The **Post** ran no columns by a Latino in the study period.

Asian-American writers contributed 3 percent of the entries in the **Post**, 2 percent in the **Journal** and 1 percent in the **Times**, while writers of Mideastern descent made up 3 percent of bylines in the **Journal**, one column in the **Post** and none in the **Times**. Of the **Journal**'s 14 entries by people of color, four came from Fouad Ajami of the Hoover

Institution and three from John Yoo of AEI.

The **Times** also featured 16 percent international voices, the **Journal** 13 percent and the **Post** 10 percent.

Women's voices have been notoriously underrepresented on major opinion pages (**Extra!**, [5-6/05](#)), and this trend has only slightly improved. Across the three papers, women made up 16 percent of opinion columnists; the **Times** led the pack with 20 percent, followed by the **Post** (16 percent) and the **Journal** (13 percent). This is an increase from 2005, when the **Times** ran 17 percent and the **Post** 10 percent female bylines (**Washington Post**, [3/7/05](#))—but it's still far from representative of the population as a whole.

The question of which women get to speak is important as well: At the **Journal**, half the female bylines were from staff columnists, all of whom are conservative and preached the same hawkish lines as their male counterparts. Guest columnists in that paper were a remarkable 94 percent male.

And among American writers, women of color were stunningly scarce: While roughly 18 percent of the U.S. population, they accounted for only 2 percent of columns in **Post** (five columns), 1 percent in the **Journal** (two columns) and a single column at the **Times** (El Paso Judge Veronica Escobar, 10/5/11). Meanwhile, white men—some 32 percent of the population—contributed 82 percent of columns in the **Journal**, 74 in the **Times** and 71 in the **Post**. None of the papers have any women of color as staff columnists.

Economic commentary

The study period featured events—Obama's jobs speech, the European debt crisis, the Republican presidential primaries, the deliberation and failure of the deficit-cutting Supercommittee, etc.—that ensured the economy would get ample attention in the papers' news and opinion pages. There were 147 op-ed columns focused on the economy, but the study period was notable both for what it included and what it left out.

At the **Journal**, op-ed coverage of economic issues skewed even further right than its other op-ed coverage. Analysts from right-wing think tanks wrote 25 percent of the paper's 71 columns on the economy, but writers with corporate affiliations wrote fully 20 percent. Republicans outweighed Democrats 12 to four. Republican presidential contenders Ron Paul (10/20/11), Herman Cain (9/15/11), Rick Perry (10/25/11) and Jon Huntsman (9/6/11) all weighed in with their ideas on taxes and fiscal policy.

Sixty-nine percent of the **Times**' 70 economic columns were written by staff writers. Fifty-five percent of guest pieces came from academics, a slightly smaller percentage than their overall representation in the paper; four op-ed writers formerly held posts in Democratic administrations and two in Republican administrations. **Post** staffers wrote 80 percent of that paper's 54 economic columns, and the few guests were mostly government officials—three Democrats, four Republicans, one who served under administrations of both parties,

and

one

independent.

Despite increasingly populist tones regarding the economy in American political discourse, the only public advocacy representative given space to write on the economy across the three papers was Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform (**Washington Post**, 10/13/11)—arguing that Republicans should not compromise on spending in exchange for more tax cuts—or gave voice to the widespread economic inequities.

The European economic crisis and its potential effect on the United States was heavily covered. **Journal** op-eds invariably cited default and austerity, as with the Cato Institute's John Cochrane (9/29/11)—“A Greek default won't destroy Europe's currency. Bailouts will,” the subhead declared—and mutual fund manager Michael Hasenstab (10/10/11): “Austerity is bitter medicine to swallow, but Ireland's citizens understand there was no easy way out of their predicament.”

At the **Post**, staffer Michael Gerson (9/30/11) wrote that “irresponsibility is now Greece's main economic product.” And aside from Krugman's articles warning against austerity (e.g., 12/2/11), **Times** coverage was ornate and politically nebulous: Staffer Roger Cohen (10/25/11) opined on the lofty symbol of the EU, headlined “The Beauty of Institutions,” while economist Todd Buchholz (9/25/11) attributed Germany's supposed tolerance of Greece's financial flagrancy to cultural envy via Freud, Nietzsche and Goethe.

Economic arguments in the **Times** and **Post** commonly acknowledged income inequality as a reality, but debate rarely moved beyond that. **Post** columnists shrugged their shoulders regarding explanations or solutions. Conservative staffer Robert Samuelson (10/9/11) wrote, “There are many theories about why inequality has increased, though no consensus.” Former Reagan/Bush Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady (10/28/11) argued, “There is no need to divide the country, as President Obama has done, by proposing to tax the wealthy as a punitive political measure as though they were the enemy,” and insisted government spending was the cause of the budget deficit problem “by an immense margin.”

In the **Times**' rarer moments of prescription, it maintained its politically disconnected, academic tone by focusing primarily on the need for both sides to play nice. Solutions to policy disputes typically involved urging bipartisanship and further moves to the center for liberals. “Obama's decision to respond to GOP extremism...by moving to the left rather than to the center, was a huge mistake,” Thomas Friedman lamented (10/5/11). David Brooks (9/16/11) urged both parties to realize their overestimation of government's ability to affect the economy, essentially taking regulatory steps off the table.

Meanwhile, at the **Journal**, the economic crisis was precipitated by governmental policy toward Fannie and Freddie (10/27/11), and the way to bring the economy back was by shedding regulations (9/28/11) and abolishing the estate tax (10/29/11).

SIDEBAR:

Unoccupied

Op-Ed

Pages

Corporate media have been panned for their slowness in covering the burgeoning global Occupy movement and their subsequent condescension toward it (Newspaper Guild, 12/1/11; **New York Times**, 11/20/11). Looking at the op-ed pages reveals even more about the national press corps' attitude towards the movement: While coverage in papers' news sections increased dramatically from September to October (**Extra!**, [11/11](#)), the opinion pages at the **Times**, **Post** and **Journal** remained entirely free of the voices of those involved.

Only 5 percent of columns mentioned Occupy, and guest voices were practically invisible except at the **Journal**—where such perspectives included those of a former hedge fund manager (10/22/11), a representative from the American Enterprise Institute (10/12/11) and Karl Rove (10/13/11), who followed a common approach to the movement in that paper: “The Tea Party files for permits for its rallies and picks up its trash afterwards. Occupy Wall Street tolerates protesters who defecate on police cars, allows the open sale of drugs at protests, and features women walking around rallies topless.”

Krugman was the biggest champion of OWS in the study period (**Times**, 10/10/11): “The extremists threatening American values are what FDR called ‘economic royalists,’ not the people camping in Zuccotti Park.” Eugene Robinson, a solidly progressive voice for the **Post**, gave a similarly vigorous defense (10/10/11): “I love that the Occupy protests arise at just the right moment and are aimed at just the right target.” Most opinion coverage of the movement, however, was not so unqualified.

The typical attitude among **Times** staff columnists, other than Krugman, seemed to be that Occupy Wall Street should be given credit for speaking up, but criticized for failing to do things in a more conventional way. “My bet is that these folks will only be remembered for having been there, taken a stand,” predicted staffer Gail Collins (10/8/11), pointing out that they failed to come up with a specific political platform.

“At some point you need the unglamorous business of government, which entails not consensus but hard choices and reasoned compromise,” wrote her colleague Bill Keller (10/31/11), who had previously (10/17/11) characterized OWS as “warmed-over anarchism.” Nicholas Kristof (10/2/11) also demurred: “I don’t share the anti-market sentiments of many of the protesters. Banks are invaluable institutions that, when functioning properly, move capital to its best use and raise living standards.”

The **Post**'s “left” offered an even more dismissive view. Richard Cohen (10/24/11) described the movement as a “destination for the aimless,” a “tourist attraction” and “a tired socialism that is as repugnant to me as the felonious capitalism that produced the mortgage bubble and the impoverishment of millions of Americans.” Dana Milbank (10/11/11) mockingly recounted an Occupy DC rally reminiscent of the movement’s “troubled ascent”: “Activists came to the microphone to argue the pros and cons of elevator disruption.”

On the right, the **Post**'s George Will (10/12/11) identified the movement's goal as demanding the "ultimate entitlement—emancipation from the ruinous results of all prior claims of entitlement," while the **Times**' David Brooks (10/11/11) proclaimed the movement full of small ideas, proposing that the real radicals were "moderates in suits."