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Keeping score: Is the paper 'fair and balanced'?

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The Free Lance-Star gets high marks for excellent local coverage. I appreciate learning about local budgets, zoning, police and fire protection issues, etc.

Multiple staff columnists comment on a wide range of topics. The paper's layout and use of color is visually appealing.

Increasing local reporting resulted in a decrease in national coverage.

With a smaller number of those articles, the FLS opinion pages have become a significant news source on many national issues. They have also become a subtle means of opinion management.

The March imbalance (80-20, right versus left) of politically tinged guest opinions is improving.

There is also an imbalance in the prominence of op-ed contributors. Political right-of-center positions are espoused by well-known pundits like Charles Krauthammer, Michael Gerson, Paul Greenberg, Steve Chapman, and Ann Coulter.

Opinions from conservative bastions like The Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and Grove City College frequently appear.

For balance, the FLS offers Mark Shields and two populist social commentators (Froma Harrop and Leonard Pitts) who occasionally express left-of-center political positions.

Prominent conservative columnists dominate, and much of the time there is no straight news or pundit commentary presenting a different viewpoint. The FLS could choose from many nationally syndicated progressive columnists to balance its conservative lineup.

Without balance, the FLS opinion pages become a once-a-day version of conservative talk radio, cable TV, and Internet sites. That will have an inevitable economic cost to the publisher.

On March 14, the topic was Rush Limbaugh. There were three opinions: one neutral, one slanted left, and one right.

Wouldn't it be great if that balance was a regular occurrence?

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