

# Interim Ministry Resources

## Chapter 9 Publications

Analysis Story City Herald (3)

### ANALYSIS OF THE STORY CITY HERALD AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS IMPROVEMENT

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A

excellent  
work -

I hope  
you will  
allow the  
editor to  
see it

## ANALYSIS OF THE STORY CITY HERALD AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS IMPROVEMENT

This thesis is a critique of a small, weekly newspaper, The Story City Herald. The essay touches upon the management and staff in order to give possible reasons why the paper is the way it is. The percentages of advertisements, local news, state and national news, legal notices and financial reports are pictorially displayed to show the make-up the newspaper. This composition focuses upon the editorial content and, together with that, provides recommendations for ways to better this vital section of the newspaper. There is a discussion of the writing style displayed in the articles, the wording of the titles, the layout and the use of pictures along with suggestions for improving the quality.

Admittedly this essay does not deal with the role of the readers' expectations. The writer has not been in his home area since before the class began to determine what the subscribing public would like to see in the newspaper or if, in fact, they are satisfied with the paper as it stands. This critical analysis is, as a result, more theoretical than anything in that it enumerates the changes this critic believes should be made in order to make it a better newspaper without really including any consensus of readership opinion.

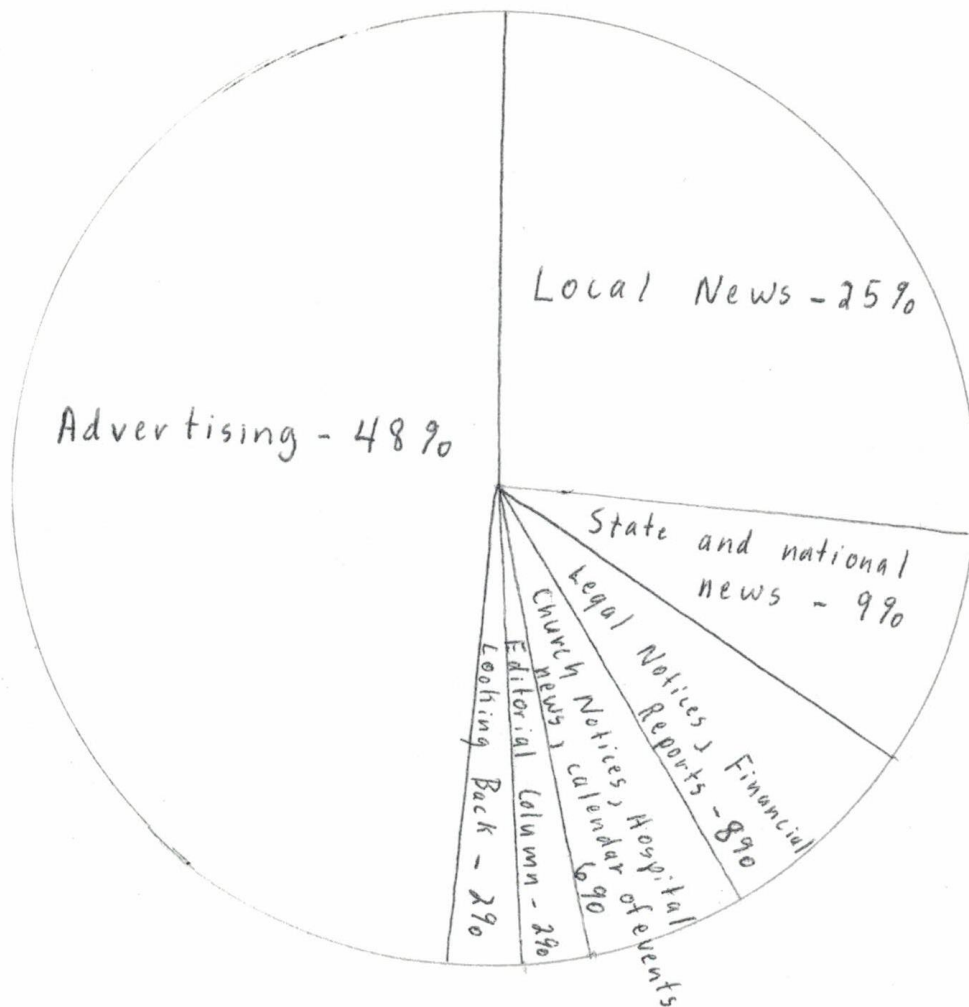
### Management and Staff

The Story City Herald is owned, published and edited by Richard and Eloise Thorson. They conduct the financial affairs of the

production, sell most of the advertising, write an editorial column and some of the copy, and take most of the pictures. Neither of the two have a journalistic background; his expertise is in selling advertisements. Three or four years previous to taking over the newspaper he published The Story City Reminder, an advertiser that came out in the middle of the week and was delivered free to the residents of the town. He sold his business to The Story City Herald and worked with the paper until he bought the publication and took over the operation. With a small setup, a limited buget, and rising costs, (not the least of which includes the skyrocketing expense of newsprint), he works to obtain an increasing number of advertisements in order to earn a maximum profit. At the same time he relies to a very large extent upon press releases, social news turned in by individuals and organizations, legal notices and church notices to fill up the rest of the space. He no doubt wants to be able to keep his readers informed but he must depend on sources other than an independent reporting staff to do it.

His employees are mostly middle-aged women who have taken the jobs in order to earn more money for the family. None of them have any appreciable journalistic training. They serve as secretaries, copyreaders and proofreaders; in addition they call various people to gather local social news. Together with the editors they help to lay out the paper. None of them can really be called reporters.

## Make-up of the Newspaper



Advertising - Out of a typical copy of 14 pages, usually 6 will be all ads. Various advertisements appear on some of the other pages.

Looking Back - Local news briefs from years back are included in a column to show what life was like previously.

The Norse and The Mini Norse, the papers for the high school and the junior high school respectively, are included in The Herald about twice a month. This writer <sup>did not</sup> figure these in when computing the various percentages.

Local, state and national news will be discussed later. The rest of the categories are self-explanatory.



## Editorial Content

Local, state and national news occupies roughly 34% of the average copy of The Story City Herald. In the February 6 issue part of the state news consists of a lengthy column by Don Reid in which he comments about railroads, repeal of three percent sales tax on food and prescription drugs, question of open hunting season on doves, liquor establishments in small towns, sewage funds and county homes. Another full column is composed of twenty-six news briefs on state and national events. In addition a report from Congressman William J. Scherle (Rep.-Iowa) is included. There are a few press releases on such matters as Iowa Association of School Boards opposing a certain bill, and Peoples Natural Gas customers reducing use of gas. Most, if not all, of these items are from the Iowa Press Association. The small weekly, of course, is dependent upon these releases for other than local news. This essay is not concerned so much about the use of these pieces but, rather, the local news.

The majority of the local news is more social news or tidbits for gossip than anything else. The gamut includes local briefs - who visited who, when and where; sorority meetings - items of business and the topic of discussion afterwards; who returned home from the hospital; nursery school children going on a field trip; death notices and obituaries; engagements and wedding notices; and bowling scores from league play. What is left after the above is the serious news for the local community. The most prominent

items are the announcements of important events of community interest, projects for community participation, pieces of interest to the farming community, reports of city council and school board meetings, and achievements of local individuals whether it be in business, community service, the armed services, school or sports.

### Improving the Local News Section

One of the biggest services the editor can provide is interpretative reporting of events in the real world and how they affect the community. By keeping informed of state and national developments the editor and staff can analyze the problem and research the situation by contacting key individuals in order to find out the impact for the residents of the area. For instance the present gas shortage is an excellent opportunity for the staff and editors to keep abreast of the decisions on the national and state levels in regards to the distribution of gas in order to determine how the local citizens stand to fare. The newspaper must avoid editorializing, writing in the first person and expressing personal opinions in these news analysis reports. The editor need not worry so much, though, about being strictly objective for "it can be argued, in fact, that newspaper 'objectivity' is nothing but a passing fad — a fad that peaked in the 1960s and is already on the wane."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Peter M. Sandman, D. M. Rubin, and D. B. Sachsman, "Newspapers," Media: An Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communication (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), p. 248.



The school board and the city council need to be covered with regularity to provide, not the perfunctory recitals of meetings similar to secretary's minutes, but, instead, reports of the depth and breadth of the workings of the school system and the city government. Taxpayers have a right to know exactly how their money is being spent and how it is proposed to being spent. Such stories need to be prominently displayed rather than hidden in the back pages. The superintendent, principal and educators of the school and mayor, councilmen and city officials can be educated to give tips on news of interest and importance to the readers.<sup>2</sup> The editor and staff can provide a valuable service for the area by reporting what other communities have done when faced with problems similar to those in front of the people. This can go a long way toward preventing the town from being a "walled-in-city."<sup>3</sup>

Utilities are another area of unexplored news potential. Many of the readers are interested in knowing why the telephone company is tearing up the streets or why the date of billing for utilities is changed.<sup>4</sup>

Another possibility yet to be fully tapped is local features. New and different methods of operation on the farm appeals to the large agricultural readership. The building of homes and thereby expanding of the city is important news fit for feature stories. Unique hobbies and personalities behind them are items that can be

<sup>2</sup>Grant Milnor Hyde, "Better Local News Coverage," Newspaper Handbook (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941), p. 244.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 245.



of interest to many people.

News of schoolchildren can and should be included in the newspaper. Almost all segments of the population are interested in what is happening with the upcoming generation. Sports stories, honor roll lists, acceptances to colleges and universities and winners of the Betty Crocker contests are written up regularly. But features can cover such things as innovations used to help in the learning process, especially in the elementary school, special projects inside and outside of the classroom and new programs like work-study and release time. During the winter when influenza strikes hard an article on the increased absence lists and possibly a picture of a near-empty class would be a newsworthy human interest story.<sup>5</sup>

Another recommendation for livening up the newspaper involves the use of interviews with certain individuals on selected topics. "They reproduce in printed form the opinions that are being expressed by citizens in the stores, banks, workshops, and public buildings."<sup>6</sup> An interview with a local gasoline station dealer might give added insight to the local citizens on the distribution of gas during periods of fuel allocation. Other possibilities include: (1) "A federal bureau issues a long business study report — what local application does the home-town merchant see in it?" (2) The federal postal system raises its rates — what are the local postmaster's

<sup>5</sup>Idea suggested by article in The Forest City Summit of Thursday, January 31, 1974 on page 1; Forest City, Iowa.

<sup>6</sup>Hyde, p. 238.

views on it? Also, how does it affect area merchants? (3) The leading banks in the nation raise their prime interest rate — what effect does the banker see on the community business economy?<sup>7</sup> All of the above situations involve the views of local businessmen in regards to the impact of state and national happenings on the community. But all interviews, of course, need not be on this level. They can and should include all types of people on various areas of interest.

Can the revisions and suggestions for improvement mentioned above be carried out with the existing staff? It is doubtful. The changes can only be made when the editors hire a reporter or two with journalistic training and background and when they, themselves, learn the basics as well as the intricacies of the journalistic trade. If the newspaper is to modernize it must rid itself of an almost complete dependence upon handouts and develop an ability to gather news on their own.

### Writing Style

A reliance upon so-called news from organizations and individuals creates a problem for newspapers. In regards to many of the announcements sent in, the question can be asked — is it newsworthy or is it just free advertising? To the latter the answer is always yes; to the former the answer is affirmative only part of the time. But when a paper exists "with the help of their friends" it has little choice but to use the releases. As a result many of the

<sup>7</sup>Hyde, p. 238.

articles are full of exhortations to support this cause or attend that event. An example is found in an article about the Jaycee newspaper drive in the January 23, 1974 issue:

Leave your bundled newspapers on the parking in front of your home. Papers must be folded once and tied into suitable bundles. If you prefer, you may drop your bundles at 803 Penn. Ed. Justice's garage, prior to the pick-up date. HELP YOUR COMMUNITY!!! SAVE OLD NEWSPAPERS!!!<sup>8</sup>

Another example on the same page is as follows:

You are invited to attend the first meeting of the Christian Women's Fellowship with others who are seeking real meaning in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Quality newspapers make the decision as to whether the announcement submitted is advertisement or news fit for publication. If advertisement, it goes in the advertisement section; if news, it is rewritten as an information article in the third person and free appeals except when they appear as quotes.

Another common mistake is the use of the same, trite expression to introduce the notices of coming events - a meeting will be held. This kind of lead needs to be discarded and replaced by a variety of interesting intitial sentences. The topic for discussion, the purpose of the occasion or the planned activity are all more suitable for the introduction than to simply say there will be a meeting. The article, as a whole, needs to contain active, hard-hitting verbs in short paragraphs along with some quotes from individuals involved to brighten up the story.

<sup>8</sup>"Jaycee Newspaper Drive Feb. 9," The Story City Herald, 23 January 1974, p. 1, col. 2.

<sup>9</sup>"Christian Women's Fellowship Meeting to be Held," The Story City Herald, 23 January 1974, p. 1, col. 3.



## Headlines

Headlines in The Story City Herald read too much like labels for the stories. "Report from Federal Land Bank Assoc." is a case in point.<sup>10</sup> This could be improved by stating the central idea of the report. "Federal Land Bank Association Reports Record Long-term Credit" would tell a more complete story than the one stated in the paper. By eradicating passive verbs and participles and, instead, using active, vivid verbs and concrete nouns, the paper would be much more interesting and exciting to read. The use of the infinitive, although not as preferred as the active verb, is more desirable than passives and participles. At times the main verb is implied and need not be stated. The headline by itself needs to convey a message. Bigger stories deserve longer headlines, while shorter stories only need the smaller ones.

## Layout of Page One

The front page is laid out in four columns. The type is fairly well-spaced with plenty of white space between the articles to make easy reading of the copy. A two-column, horizontal picture frequently occupies the upper right-hand corner. The lead story is then usually placed at the top of column two. There are neither banner headlines nor articles that have display decks of more than one statement separated by hyphens. Most of the type used in the headlines is bold Roman style; a few stories, especially those with lengthy headlines, have light-faced Roman type. Because

<sup>10</sup>The Story City Herald, 23 January 1974, p. 1, col. 4.



the editors rely on people from the community to supply much of the news, the front page is often long on notices and announcements occupying one, two or three paragraphs and short on articles that run more than a half page. None of the reports are continued to inside pages. A number of the lengthier articles that The Herald does use are notices from the city clerk about bond sales and other such city business written in the stylized language typical of such legal announcements.

If the paper had an independent reporting force, chances are the front page would not look so much like a large jig-saw puzzle with miniature pieces. Hard news of story length could push the less-important announcements of open houses and public auctions back into the inside pages and make for a more sophisticated looking page one. The contributions by the city clerk could be rewritten in a journalistic style to make it more uniform with the rest of the articles and easier to read. For the longer articles they should use bigger headlines with bolder type; for smaller pieces one-liners with lighter type would be more appropriate. During the month of December the editors need to refrain from placing a box on the front page urging the readers to take care of all their shopping needs in Story City. The newspaper people also need to get rid of the box in the lower right-hand corner appearing periodically that encourages readers to renew their subscriptions if a red check is in the little square.

## Photography

Most of the pictures in The Story City Herald are posed shots that, along with the cut, are stories in themselves or else are supplements to regular stories. Shots typical of this kind are of those having a birthday at the retirement home during that month, engagement and wedding pictures, group photos and individual mugshots. The editor includes a few candid shots such as pictures of Lion members making pancakes at the annual pancake supper or an owner and some customers drinking coffee at the open house of a new store. Some of the best action shots are of basketball and wrestling contributed by the high school photographer. Pictures reproduce poorly in The Story City Herald; some of the contrast is naturally lost in the reproduction of the print for use on the press, and more is lost because of the quality of the paper.

There are some things that the editors and the photographers could do to improve the pictorial section of The Herald. They could use fine grain film in shooting and filters when enlarging in order to obtain maximum contrast and sharpness. The photographers could print on 8" X 10" paper in order to have a large image to work with. Making a glossy finish, instead of a mat finish, would enhance the best reproduction of the photographs. More human interest pictures should be included. They do not have to be of any great news value but, instead, just tell an interesting story about a slice of life in the community. Last, but not least,

the editor could use a higher quality paper for better reproduction. This latter suggestion is admittedly not as feasible as the previous ones.

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