

Tell the Truth, But Slant, While Web Trolls Rant

by John Koblin | February 26, 2008



The New York Times; Getty Images

Frank Rich, Gail Collins, Maureen Dowd and Paul Krugman.

It was a little over a month ago that The New York Times' editorial board urged voters to cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary. On one level, the editorial was blunt.

“As Democrats look ahead to the primaries in the biggest states on Feb. 5, The Times' editorial board strongly recommends that they select Hillary Clinton as their nominee for the 2008 presidential election,” the item, appearing a little less than two weeks before Super Tuesday, declared.

But to some, there were grace notes that suggested the editorial board would not be mortified to have to endorse Barack Obama in the general election come November.

The rather dainty endorsement was as politic as a college valedictorian's graduation address, and as tightly wound.

In the rest of the editorial section, the rules are exactly the opposite. In a column from Jan. 27, Times editorial columnist Frank Rich wrote that a Hillary Clinton nomination “will send the Democrats into the general election with a new and huge peril that may well dwarf the current wars over race, gender.”

On Feb. 24, he wrote that Mrs. Clinton “offers only a chilly void: Abandon hope all ye who enter here. This must be the first presidential candidate in history to devote so much energy to preaching against optimism, against inspiring language and ‘talk about bizarre’ against democracy itself.”

Maureen Dowd's Jan. 6 column, “Voting for a Smile,” offered Barack Obama a kiss with a kick in it when she said that “vague optimism and smooth-jazz modernity came together in a spectacular fusion with the deep yearning of Democrats who have suffered through heartbreaking losses in the last two elections with uninspiring candidates.”

Three days later, she wrote, "[Hillary Clinton's] argument against Obama now boils down to an argument against idealism, which is probably the lowest and most unlikely point to which any Clinton could sink."

Unlike the board that puts together The Times' endorsements, they can say whatever they want. They can even court an R rating. They cannot, however, endorse a candidate.

"I came here in 1995 and Howell Raines told me about it," said Gail Collins, the former editorial director, who is now herself a columnist. "His thought, as I understood it, was that it would confuse people. Columnists could hint, and could make it clear, but we couldn't explicitly say it." The logic goes like this: If Gail Collins endorses Barack Obama, then a reader might confuse it for the New York Times newspaper endorsing Barack Obama. Fat chance!

"I'm happy for that not to be my job," Ms. Collins said. "My mandate now is to help the chattering classes chatter."

"It's just not the way I think as a writer," said Frank Rich. "When I was a theater critic, I never wrote a review that would say 'Go see this play tonight! This is what I think should win the Tony Award!'"

Indeed, the editorial columnists shy away from "service journalism." This is a more elevated and enjoyable prose, ideally.

"It certainly is challenging," said David Brooks. "It's like a two-year process of deliberation without reading the verdict." They all agreed that the non-endorsing rule forces them to write about this election with a little more texture—more showing and less telling, perhaps. Ms. Dowd, for her part, explained via e-mail that the non-endorsing rule "isn't challenging for me because I don't do a partisan column (that's all I have to say about it)." By the way, they are pretty much all for Barack Obama.

"It's a constraint that leads to more interesting columns," said Paul Krugman. "If anything, it's a little bit like having your poetry scanned—it improves the writing." And his case may be the greatest test of whether the kind of old-school newspaper writing these columnists have the luxury to continue practicing—writing that helps people think things instead of buy things—can survive the barefaced polemics and commercialism that seems to drive the most prolific form of opinion-writing these days: the Comments Section.

"If Mrs. Clinton gets the Democratic nomination, there is some chance—nobody knows how big—that we'll get universal health care in the next administration. If Mr. Obama gets the nomination, it just won't happen," Mr. Krugman wrote in his column earlier this month.

In a December column, he describes Mr. Obama as "naïve" and concludes his column by saying, "Nothing Obama has said suggests that he appreciates the bitterness of the battles he will have to fight if he does become president, and tries to get anything done."

"You've managed to completely eradicate what respect I had left for you," responded Keith, while JS just called him a "buffoon," two of 161 comments on a Feb. 18 post.

Clearly, he's not thinking of his own comrades on the editorial page, but the likes of Keith and JS (whose comments are vetted by his editor), when he later writes that Obama supporters "seem far too ready to demonize their opponents."

"I won't try for fake evenhandedness here: Most of the venom I see is coming from supporters of Mr. Obama, who want their hero or nobody," Mr. Krugman later wrote. "I'm not the first to point out that the Obama campaign seems dangerously close to becoming a cult of personality."

For the benefit of our readers: We suspect Mr. Krugman supports Hillary.