

At Wall Street Journal, News Staff and Opinion Side Clash

A heated dispute between the newsroom and the opinion section of one of the country's most respected news organizations has spilled into public view.



By Edmund Lee

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In a rare display of internal strife, the opinion department of The Wall Street Journal openly antagonized the paper's news staff Thursday by publishing a tersely worded note to readers just days after it found itself on the receiving end of a sharply worded critique signed by hundreds of newsroom employees.

Turmoil inside the buttoned-up newsroom had been brewing for more than a month before the clash spilled into the view of the paper's readership.

The latest skirmish started Tuesday, when nearly 300 of The Journal's news staff members sent a letter to the paper's publisher, Almar Latour, condemning the opinion desk's "lack of fact-checking and transparency."

The letter cited several examples of essays published by the opinion section, which is operated separately from the newsroom, that included factual errors, among them a June 16 article by Vice President Mike Pence. The essay, with the headline "There Isn't a Coronavirus 'Second Wave,'" was ultimately corrected. The letter highlighted how the newsroom's own reporting more than a week earlier was at odds with Mr. Pence's claims.

"Opinion articles often make assertions that are contradicted by WSJ reporting," the letter said. In the unadorned style typical of Journal articles, the 1,400-word note documented what it said were several other fact-checking lapses in opinion essays.

The letter also said a contributor to the opinion section had endangered one of The Journal's Middle East-based journalists when the contributor "falsely claimed in a tweet" that the reporter had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The reporter, Summer Said, cited the tweet, since deleted, from the contributor, Andy Ngo, in October 2018. Mr. Ngo, a conservative journalist, has written several opinion articles for The Journal, including a 2018 piece that cited prominent displays of Islamic dress on the streets of London as an example of "failed multiculturalism."

"The safety of our reporter was put at risk by this false claim because she worked frequently in Saudi Arabia, which views the Brotherhood as an enemy," the letter read.

"Members of the newsroom were told that the Opinion page agreed to stop using this contributor," the letter continued, "but months later he was back writing for the section, suggesting that even endangering a WSJ employee by publishing misinformation isn't a serious infraction."

Dow Jones, the publisher of The Journal, declined to comment on the matter.

The editorial board shot back on Thursday. Instead of responding directly to the newsroom, it addressed its note to the paper's readers. "In the spirit of collegiality, we won't respond in kind to the letter signers," it said. "Their anxieties aren't our responsibility in any case."

The board described the in-house unrest by saying that “it was probably inevitable that the wave of progressive cancel culture would arrive at the Journal, as it has at nearly every other cultural, business, academic and journalistic institution.”

The four-paragraph response did not address the accusations of factual inaccuracy. “The opinion pages will continue to publish contributors who speak their minds,” it said, adding that their work had become “more important than ever in what is a culture of growing progressive conformity and intolerance.”



Almar Latour, who was named the publisher of The Journal and the chief executive of its parent company, Dow Jones, in May.

Dow Jones

Lauren Weber, a reporter at The Journal, said on Twitter, “To call the letter, which I signed, an example of ‘cancel culture’ is a gross mischaracterization.”

The opinion desk has been overseen by the editorial page editor Paul Gigot for nearly two decades. Mr. Gigot declined to comment beyond the note.

The Journal’s editorial board ultimately answers to Rupert Murdoch, the owner of The Journal since 2007. He also controls Fox News through his other business, Fox Corp. Mr. Murdoch declined to comment. Mr. Latour, who in May was named the publisher of The Journal and the chief executive of Dow Jones, declined to comment.

The Journal is one of many media organizations, including The Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Los Angeles Times, Fox News, Hearst and Condé Nast, where staff members have questioned leadership at a time of widespread protests against racism and police brutality prompted by the killing in May of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis who died after a white police officer pressed a knee to his neck.

The Times’s editorial page editor, James Bennet, resigned last month after roughly 1,000 of the paper’s staff members signed a letter protesting the publication of an Op-Ed by a United States senator calling for a military response to domestic civil unrest.

At The Journal, a group identifying itself as “members of the WSJ newsroom” said in a June 23 letter to the editor in chief, Matt Murray, that the paper must “encourage more muscular reporting about race and social inequities,” and called for fundamental changes in its news coverage.

Two weeks earlier, more than 150 newsroom employees sent a letter to Journal leaders saying that the paper’s coverage of race was “problematic” and that its staff was not diverse enough.

A week before that, Journal reporters and editors sent a letter requesting that the paper's previous editor in chief, Gerard Baker, who had stayed on as a news columnist, be reassigned to the opinion section. Faulting columns he had written on race, the letter said his work had violated newsroom standards. Mr. Baker was moved to the opinion staff the day after the letter was sent.



The editorial board ultimately answers to Rupert Murdoch, who has owned The Journal since 2007. Mary Altaffer/Associated Press

Bill Grueskin, a former editor at The Journal, said there had been a longstanding beef between the paper's news and opinion desks, adding that those on the news side would often "grumble quietly" about the editorials. "Not so much because of the politics," he said, "but because of their issues with accuracy and leaps of logic."

He chided the editorial board's response as "indicative of the very problems the newsroom cited — it's inaccurate."

He added, "The newsroom isn't trying to 'cancel' anyone." Referring to the board's letter to readers, he said, "And it failed to address the most serious failing, which is that they continued to publish pieces by someone who endangered a staffer's safety and career."

The Journal's newsroom employees said in the Tuesday letter that the opinion desk's factual inaccuracies and lack of fairness had gotten in the way of their ability to do their jobs.

"Many readers already cannot tell the difference between reporting and opinion," it read. "Some of us have been told by sources that they won't talk to us because they don't trust that the WSJ is independent of the editorial page; many of us have heard sources and readers complain about the paper's 'bias' as a result of what they've read in Opinion."

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