

Venues for Leveraging Presidents' Influence through Op-eds

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Updated September 17, 2014

Opinion pieces, or op-eds, have been a staple of college and university communications for decades. In the noisy marketplace of today's media, they offer you a way to present a cohesive argument on a topic of importance to the institution and its president. Another major plus is that, on the web, op-eds enjoy a kind of digital immortality, allowing them a voice in discussions of a topic for years to come.

As public relations counsel to your president, you have a key role in developing a strategy for op-eds, then assisting the president determining in what to talk about, how to say it, and how to place the piece for maximum impact. While this paper focuses on the president, the information applies equally to op-eds by board members, members of the president's cabinet, and other leaders.

As part of a research project on presidential presence in op-eds, I have gathered all the opinion pieces I could identify written by sitting college and university presidents across all sectors of nonprofit higher education in the first half of 2014. All news media outlets – newspapers and magazines, print and electronic – were included (but not media controlled by the institution, such as alumni magazine columns and website blogs).

By August I had put 214 opinion pieces into a database to analyze style, structure, subject, novel concepts, and where they appeared. Here are some quick demographics of those writing the op-eds: About 65 percent are from private institutions, 30 percent from public four-year institutions, and 5 percent from community colleges. Approximately 75 percent of the writers are male, and 25 percent female.

This white paper is intended to be a “look under the hood” of these pieces for my colleagues in higher education communication. It primarily examines placement venues, and includes lots of links for those who want to drill down on any particular item. It's a tour of some of the less known – or less understood – op-ed placement possibilities that I found while exploring this jungle of opinion.

It's Lonely in Op-Ed Land – The number 214 may sound like a lot of op-eds by college and university CEOs. However, only about 140 individual presidents are represented in that number, given that some over-achievers placed more than one op-ed during the period. And remember there's a universe of over 3,600 CEOs of nonprofit institutions and systems. The takeaway: There's a lot of op-ed territory ripe for development.

Where the Op-eds Are (It's Not the Majors) – In op-ed placements, if the traditional national print media represent the peak of Mount Everest, few presidents will make the climb. Across all 214 op-eds studied, only ten appeared in the top five newspapers by circulation. Even adding in the three major magazine placements only bumps the combined category to six percent of all published op-eds.

No worries, though. There are lots of other options beyond the majors.

The largest subset of op-ed placement venues is online – or primarily online – news media and news aggregators. The category accounts for 41 percent of all op-eds analyzed. That percentage is a bit misleading, though, because of the domination of one outlet: the Huffington Post, which with 74 op-eds accounted for four-fifths of all online placements studied.

[The Huffington Post](#) – What to make of the Huffington Post? It’s a big, brawling, sometimes lewd, sometimes thoughtful online mega-city that continues to grow. The [web analytics firm Alexa](#) currently ranks it 20th in traffic in the U.S. – with the only news site above it being CNN.com at 19. In his lengthy 2012 [Columbia Journalism Review cover story](#), Michael Shapiro chronicles the site’s conception, birth, and growth in the preceding seven years, noting its approach to building communities and enticing contributors.

It wasn’t by accident that HuffPo became the go-to place for college presidents’ opinion pieces. As it was building out its communities in 2011, the site proactively recruited college presidents as contributors.

According to a highly-placed HuffPo editor who spoke off the record, “I adopted a spreadsheet mentality,” contacting every president of a nonprofit college or university in the country. Many presidents were flattered to be asked, and not only contributed pieces but touted their participation in news releases and TV interviews.

Over the years, some of those early adopters dropped out and other presidents have signed up. Currently, the editor says, around 400 college presidents are regular contributors – or, technically, bloggers. Still, he says, they would welcome more participation by presidents.

Auditioning for a contributor slot is easy, he notes: “A head shot, a short bio, and a sample essay” for their consideration. *(Use [this online form](#) to submit an op-ed/blog of up to 1,000 words for consideration; note that this contact info has been updated since earlier versions of this paper.)*

In recent years the site has gained respectability, even winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2012. Still, for some higher education folks, the HuffPo environment doesn’t feel quite right. Positioning a president’s thoughtful comments on, say, campus sexual assaults adjacent to a right-column link to a story on some actress’s sex life may be a bit disconcerting for some presidents. It can be a bit like trying to give a scholarly lecture on a carnival midway.

If you’re looking for a less hurly-burly venue for your president’s thoughts, other opportunities do abound.

[Forbes Magazine](#) – Only a very few college PR people and their presidents have discovered this prime outlet. Now a serious digital player, the site features only a handful of college presidents as regular contributors to its [Leadership section](#) – and *Forbes* is eager for more.

“Presidents, or provosts and other top officials, are welcome to send pieces directly to me at FAllen@forbes.com, says Frederick Allen, the Leadership section editor. “If the articles are especially political, I may pass them along to our op-ed editor. Also I’m always happy to hear from top educators who might want to be considered for regular contributorships.”

Bloomberg View – Founded in 2011, this is the opinion arm of Bloomberg News, which of course is a key enterprise of the ever-expanding Bloomberg media conglomerate. Laura Bennett’s December 2013 [profile of Bloomberg View](#) in *New Republic* traces its bold ambitions and uncertain evolution over its first three years. That evolution continues in the months since the *New Republic* piece, and presidents might find a welcome mat there as Bloomberg View continues to expand its offerings.

“We certainly will consider opinion pieces [from presidents],” says Alex Bruns, digital content producer at Bloomberg View. “We typically run op-eds between 800 and 1,000 words. The best way to reach us is to send the op-ed either to me directly (abrunsbloomberg.net) or to oped@bloomberg.net with the full text pasted into the body of the message, rather than as an attachment.”

The Other New York Times – Most people tend to think of *NYT* op-ed placement possibilities as restricted to the handful of pieces appearing in the print edition daily. However, the paper offers an abundance of other opinion opportunities. In October 2013, Op-ed Editor Trish Hall offered a [detailed insider’s view](#) of opinion at the *Times*.

Hall mentions in passing a couple of the other venues – the [Sunday Review](#) in print and Opinionator on the website, which may take a bit of explaining.

- **Opinionator**: At present, Opinionator consists of ten subject-specific forums on topics ranging from nursing to the Civil War to solving major social problems. The narrow focus of most of the forums make them possible venues for some faculty members, and probably less appropriate for presidents.

Opinionator forums change over time, so check the main [NYT Opinion page sidebar](#) for a current list. There appears to be no comprehensive overview of the Opinionator forums and the focus of each, so [I created one](#).

- **Room for Debate**: In her overview, Hall neglects to mention this other *Times* outlet for opinion, which offers multiple contributed views on a specific topic. (*Note that the link is to the education page, not the main page.*) The site notes that “the *Times* invites knowledgeable outside contributors to discuss news events and other timely issues.” Contact them at roomfordebate@gmail.com.

Presidents are occasionally featured as debaters (though none appeared during the survey period). Faculty members, however, are included almost every week.

The Other Half of Presidents' Op-eds – Of the rest of the op-eds studied, about 12 percent appeared in trade periodicals – primarily the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. For those of us in higher ed communication, these outlets are so well known that I won't talk about them here, but they will be part of an in-depth content analysis to come.

The second biggest, category of placements is local and regional newspapers, accounting for the other 38 percent. If the major print and online media are the show horses of presidents' op-ed placements, these close-to-home placements are the work horses – and they pull a heavy load, given the importance of state and local case-stating.

Here the competition for placements is less fierce, there's a home team advantage that makes even a touch of boosterism acceptable in the piece, and truth be told, you're far more likely to reach members of your constituencies who have a vested interest in your institution.

An op-ed placement in the *New York Times* is a bit like a short-term fling – exciting and a bit glamorous – while the long-term relationship with your local and regional newspapers (plus, of course, local radio and TV) is a solid marriage that has the interests of both parties at heart.

The rules for op-ed placements at these smaller papers vary greatly, and with staff turnover, the current contact is sometimes hard to find. Fortunately, The Oped Project has done much of that work for you.

[The Oped Project](#) was founded in 2008 “to increase the number of women thought leaders contributing to key commentary forums.” (See their “[Byline Report](#)”) The site includes [op-ed submission information](#) for 125 media outlets, including newspapers from the Wall Street Journal to those with print circulations well under 100,000.

But Wait, That's Not All... For those who simply can't get enough information about op-eds, I've [created a web page](#) that will serve as a continuing resource in conceiving, developing, and placing op-eds by both presidents and faculty at colleges and universities. It's also a place where you can join, and contribute to, the conversation by sharing your insights and information.

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