**Editor's Note:** America’s Newspapers and its members have a vested interest in helping the general public learn how to discern facts from falsehoods. Members are encouraged to publish this opinion piece and accompanying editorial cartoon – or write their own editorial – to educate the public and our legislators about this important issue.

**Separating fact from fiction**

**Dean Ridings
CEO, America's Newspapers**

Fake news. Those two words have likely created more confusion and distrust of the news media than any other. While it is easy to understand why those of us who work in the news media despise the term, it should also be apparent that the general public has a vested interest in discerning facts from falsehoods.

Some of the louder news voices of the past few decades have been the cable news networks that provide news, analysis and opinion. But the opinion side now dominates on CNN, FOX and many of the major news outlets. If you lean conservative, it is easy to find commentary you agree with on FOX, and if you’re liberal, you will likely consider MSNBC your source. There is nothing wrong with the news media providing opinions, and it often plays an important role in explaining what the facts may mean. The problem comes when the audience doesn’t discern the difference between news and opinion.

Opinions on newspaper editorial pages have been in the news recently. So, this is a good time to look at why newspapers print editorials, and how readers should regard their worth, their impact and their relationship to how news is covered by newspapers.

On June 7, The New York Times*’* editorial page editor resigned and a deputy editorial page editor stepped down for a new job after the newspaper’s website published U.S. Senator Tom Cotton’s controversial opinion piece justifying using the armed forces on American soil during civil unrest. About the same time, there were announcements from several papers around the country that they would be cutting back, even in some cases eliminating, the editorials they publish.

And looming over all this is the presidential election in November. If history is any guide, a record number of newspapers will decline to say who should lead the United States at a time of racial protest, uncertain progress in the COVID-19 pandemic and economic turmoil.

Newspaper editorial and opinion pages have long engendered misunderstanding among readers, and much of the confusion is, frankly, the fault of newspapers ourselves. Since we understand the very important distinctions between news and opinions, we too often fail to remind our audience of the firewall we’ve established between the reporting of our journalists and the opining of editorial writers. Additionally, we don’t always label the opinion pieces as clearly as is needed.

A quick couple of definitions: The most common meaning of an “editorial” is the unsigned opinion piece that represents the view of the newspaper itself. An op-ed or column presents the individual view of an identified person who might or might not work for the newspaper.

Let’s focus on those unsigned editorials, and why they matter.

First, here’s what editorials ***don’t*** do: They do not affect in any manner the way newspaper reporters cover the news, whether the news is about the city council or the president of the United States. Editorials are not marching orders for journalists. When journalists are educated and trained, one of the first tenets they learn is to state the facts and keep their opinions out of the story.

Here’s what editorials do, and what is often misunderstood: Yes, editorials represent the views of the newspaper, sometimes determined by individual owners, sometimes by independent editorial boards or by corporate owners of many publications. But the editorials that emerge from those views are usually the products of deep research. They clarify the issues of the day and serve to give readers insights into those issues — whether those issues concern how to straighten out the traffic mess at the edge of town or how to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Editorials are another service that newspapers provide for readers.

But, to repeat, it is a service too often misunderstood. Newspaper editors often hear from — and opinion polls reflect — a significant minority of readers who think that a newspaper’s editorial endorsement of a particular candidate colors its reporters’ coverage of the campaign. Newspapers, these folks will say, are trying to “dictate” how people should vote, a surely inappropriate thing.

Newspapers can — and do — provide fair and fearless reporting while offering strong and insightful opinion on the other side of their newsroom/opinion page firewalls. But there are still two needed components for our country to trust their news sources. Newspapers have a responsibility to label opinion pieces appropriately and to keep the news objective, but the reader also has the responsibility to take the time to understand the difference. Until then, we will likely continue to hear cries of fake news when the reader doesn’t like what they read. And that’s when we all lose.

*On behalf of its approximately 1,500 newspaper and associate member companies, America’s Newspapers is committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life. We put an emphasis on educating the public on all the ways newspapers contribute to building a community identity and the success of local businesses. Learn more:* [*www.newspapers.org*](http://www.newspapers.org)

For more information, contact:

Dean Ridings
CEO, America’s Newspapers
dridings@newspapers.org