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# When everybody's a critic: effects of a newspaper's self-improvement program

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**WHEN EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC:  
EFFECTS OF A NEWSPAPER'S SELF-IMPROVEMENT  
PROGRAM**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

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## **ABSTRACT**

This case study examined a peer-evaluation program at The Advocate newspaper in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in which employees took turns serving on committees that critiqued each day's coverage. Their critique reports, containing both negative and positive comments on all elements of the news pages, were distributed to each employee of the news department. The study examines the content of the critique reports to determine whether the participants and the editors thought the program improved the newspaper, whether they wanted to continue it and what changes might improve it.

The research methods included a survey of the news staff, a content analysis of the critique reports the staff wrote during a one-year period, and interviews with the editors. Results showed a majority of the staff mildly favored the program, thought it improved the newspaper and wanted to continue it with some revisions. The staff particularly favored more feedback from the top editors. The content analysis indicated that staffers addressed a broad range of problems and often offered solutions. The editors generally agreed with the findings and planned to continue the program.

The findings suggested that other newspapers attempting staffwide critique programs should provide specific training, write detailed guidelines, focus on problem areas instead of everything in the news pages, require positive as well as negative comments, encourage critics to offer solutions, and ensure management has a strong role.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The newspaper industry must compete with younger media that vie for consumers' attention. One way to compete is to simply improve the quality of the news content. The Advocate, a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, newspaper, had been trying to do that with a novel, staff-centered critique program. This case study assessed The Advocate program. This program might interest media managers because it cost little and tapped the expertise of the entire news staff, not just a writing coach or ombudsman.

The Advocate program required almost every member of the news staff to take turns critiquing the news pages. Starting in May 2000, the 130 members of the news department at The Advocate began serving on rotating "critique committees." Each week four staffers, from typists to reporters to the news editor, read their assigned sections of the newspaper every day and wrote critiques about anything they wished: typos, style, spelling, photos, headlines, effectiveness of layouts, holes in stories, whether the writing was lively enough, whether stories were displayed appropriately<sup>1</sup>. The managing editor compiled each day's contributions from the four critics and e-mailed the combined critique report to the entire staff to read if they wished. Each report covered one day's editions and typically lagged about three days behind publication. Critiques usually were just food for thought from one colleague to another; they carried no official weight, according to Executive Editor Linda Lightfoot. The management did not even require staffers to read the reports, much less take them to heart<sup>2</sup>. Only occasionally did the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Whittum, managing editor, interview with the author, September 3, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> L. Lightfoot, executive editor, interview with the author, September 11, 2001.

critiques include instructions or even comments from the top editors. Each newsroom employee served on a critique committee about twice a year.

The executive editor began the critiques to root out grammar errors and other mechanical mistakes that she said undermined the paper's credibility in the community. But the program soon expanded in two ways: First, every element of the news product -- such as photos and clarity issues -- became fair game for the critics. And comments praising good work began to rival negative comments in the daily critique reports.

Do the creators and participants in the program think it worked? Was it worth the effort and angst? How unique was this program? Might other newspapers find value in it? Those questions prompted this study.

The literature on media efforts to improve their products is weak and scant. Professional literature indicates that newspapers and journalism groups have made significant efforts to improve so they could meet growing competition from other media (Lemert, 1989). But rarely have those efforts attracted the attention of serious researchers. Reasons for this could include the small-scale, informal or short-term nature of many improvement efforts, the poor relations between academics and professionals in this field, and media professionals' unwillingness to invite criticism from outsiders (Lemert, 1989, Hamilton & Izard, 1996, Overholser, 2000).

The Advocate program offered potential to help fill the gap in this knowledge. The program was significant, long-term and consistent: It involved the work of 130 people and was underway on a daily basis for more than a year. It had a significant, concrete work product -- hundreds of critique reports (See Appendix B) -- and thus was subject to quantifiable evaluation. And the newspaper's management welcomed the academic

intrusion; managers agreed to submit to interviews, make staffers available for a survey and make critique documents available for analysis.

One obstacle to this project was lack of guidance from the literature. Past studies suggested specific standards for evaluating written content and for training evaluators. The Advocate program, however, offered general standards and a short orientation in lieu of training (See Appendix A).

Lack of prior research models also made this study more challenging. Methods for studying ombudsmen and peer evaluation were useful, but their value was limited here because The Advocate program was significantly different from the ombudsman and peer-evaluation models cited in the literature (Moses, 2000, Curtis, 1996).

This study did not seek to make conclusions about The Advocate program's effects on the quality of the newspaper. Assessing those effects would require quantifying the quality of a year's worth of news pages -- a huge and highly subjective task. And that evaluation would have to somehow account for confounding variables, such as staff changes or other improvement efforts, that also could affect quality during a year's time.

In short, this study could not conclude whether The Advocate program works. But it might:

- Help determine whether peer evaluation, an improvement tool used frequently in education and in some other industries, holds promise for the media field too.
- Determine the kinds of comments -- positive or negative, deep or shallow, broad or detailed -- one can expect from a staff-driven critique program.
- Suggest whether The Advocate system might have overcome journalists' strong resistance to criticism, a major stumbling block to any improvement.
- Assess the unusual role of managers in a staff-centered evaluation program.

- Determine whether the managers and staffers involved in the program thought it actually did improve quality, and how.
- Determine whether the participants in the program thought its results were worth the effort expended.
- Interest other researchers in self-improvement efforts and give them some guidance on conducting such studies.
- Help other media managers develop potentially successful improvement programs for their own newspapers by adopting The Advocate's seemingly successful procedures and avoiding its perceived pitfalls.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review focused on newspaper self-improvement efforts. It included books, academic journals, magazines, archives of professional groups and newspaper articles. The search did not produce any program exactly like The Advocate's. But the literature review did produce relevant results in six areas:

1. A need for academic study of self-improvement efforts in the media.
2. Journalists' strong resistance to criticism, and reasons for that resistance.
3. The internal role of ombudsmen, whose work is somewhat similar to The Advocate program and who have been the focus of significant study.
4. Research on "peer evaluation" that might apply to The Advocate program.
5. How newspaper self-improvement programs typically work.
6. How The Advocate program matches widely held principles of good journalism.

#### **Need for Study of Internal Improvement Efforts**

The literature suggests that one obstacle to media self-improvement is the scarcity of significant self-improvement efforts that have been subjected to academic study.

Lemert (1989) said newspapers have tried several methods of self-examination. "However, none has ever been tried often enough, and with such universally praised results," to prove that self-examination is a credible way to improve the industry (p. 14). Where sufficient literature did exist, he said, it mostly showed that journalism is so bound by tradition and daily deadlines that change was difficult to accept or even consider.

Lemert's list of self-improvement efforts and his negative views on their results (p. 12-14) are a good place to start the discussion:

- In-house criticism by a senior editor. Efforts are spotty, short-term, inconsistent.
- Ombudsmen. Reporters are too sensitive to their criticism.
- Professional societies. Their effects have never been unstudied.
- National journalism reviews. They were limited to big-picture articles and could not take on the specific deficiencies of 1,500 daily newspapers across the nation.
- News councils. They sought to mediate between the press and the public by investigating complaints about the media and releasing the results. Few still exist.
- Major-media coverage of the media. Larger newspapers and general-interest magazines covered media as a beat in the same way they covered the auto industry, for instance. But coverage rarely focused on the quality of the news media, and researchers have conducted little research on this coverage.
- Commentary by thoughtful professionals. This method has generated food for thought but has produced few quality-improvement initiatives (except for ombudsmen).

Two other significant self-improvement efforts turned up in further searches: writing coaches, a topic of discussion later in this thesis, and seminars that various groups sponsored for journalists. Typical organizations offered several seminars a year, each enrolling 25 to 60 journalists.

For instance, The Poynter Institute of St. Petersburg, Florida, has held more than 50 seminars each year. Several seminars in 2001 focused on improving the quality of newspapers' news product. Titles of the three-to-six-day seminars included "Newspaper Writing and Editing," "Reporting with the Internet" and "Picture Editing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Hundreds of journalists attended the seminars each year (Poynter, 2001).

Some institutes were more focused. The Hechinger Institute for Education and the Media, based at Teachers College of Columbia University in New York, New York, offered six seminars a year, each for about 30 journalists. The three-day seminars were related to covering education issues. Annual reports indicated sessions were filled (Hechinger Institute, 2000).

Ombudsmen and professional societies are two other paths to improvement. Ombudsmen worked at about 40 U.S. newspapers (Starck & Eisele, 1999) and were the focus of significant, if inconclusive, research. Professional societies also were abundant, ranging from general journalism organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists to more focused groups such as Investigative Reporters and Editors to specialist clubs such as the Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors. Through Internet sites, conferences, newsletters and listservs, these groups offered advice, linked reporters to story ideas and gave awards to highlight and encourage outstanding work. However, the effects of these groups on news products had not been studied.

Some literature noted a tendency to let rank-and-file journalists have more say in the news product, or at least on their own work. Writing coach Don Fry (2000) promoted a system to “let reporters edit themselves” (p. 21). Under that system, an editor would comment on a story, then let the reporter finish it without further editing by the editor. Some professional articles promoted more consultation between reporters and editors and allowing writers greater say in the final version of a story (Stein, 1990).

Strapped by tight budgets, editors have tried low-cost or no-cost self-improvement and morale-boosting programs. For instance, at least a few newspapers tried “open” news meetings attended by non-editors (Noack, 1999). These practices were recent, isolated,

usually unstructured and subject to change or cancellation. It was not surprising that studies of such practices did not turn up in literature searches.

In summary, Lemert was wrong to say that significant self-improvement efforts were lacking. But he was right that academic study on those efforts was lacking. Media critic Geneva Overholser (2000) chided academics for not studying this practical, important issue. Hamilton and Izard (1996) said one reason for the lack of study might have been the strong division between daily journalists and the academic world. They also pointed out that media executives had little interest in academic work. Even Newspaper Research Journal, a publication “devoted to providing reports of practical research written in understandable language . . . is virtually ignored by many executives” (p. 17).

### **Resistance to Criticism**

The literature was replete with another obstacle to self-improvement in news coverage – strong resistance to criticism. “No one likes to be criticized, but I think least of all journalists. Their skins are thin; their egos are large” (Nauman, 1994, p. 3). A New York Times editor, A.J. Raskin, famously noted the hypocrisy of this attitude: “The press prides itself -- as it should -- on the vigor with which it excoriates the malefactors in government, unions and business, but its own inadequacies escape both its censure and its notice” (Lemert, 14). Overholser was more succinct: “We can dish it out, but we sure can’t take it” (2000, p. 17). Another former ombudsman said: “We are aloof, arrogant and absolutely sure we are right” (Cunningham, 2000, p. 27).

Journalists were defensive about internal criticism and did not support it. They responded to outside criticism by declaring the critic “does not know the business” (Lemert, 1989, p. 17). Other critics noted “a built-in resistance to acknowledging mistakes” (Hannaford, 149).

When the criticism comes from inside the newsroom, such as from an ombudsman or a senior editor, other editors and rank-and-file staffers got “paranoid” and defensive (Mogavero, 1982). Fry (1996), a veteran writing coach, lamented this destructive but common spiral of distrust and resentment toward criticism in newsrooms.

A small percentage of newspapers had an ombudsman to mediate between readers and journalists (Organization of News Ombudsmen, 2000). Turnover for ombudsmen was high, largely because other staffers feared and resented them (Lemert, 1989). News staffers got even more upset when the ombudsman told the public about the newspaper’s faults through critical columns (Mogavero, 1982). This suggested some hope for The Advocate method because the newspaper did not publicize the critiques or even the fact that the critique program existed.

Why is news professionals’ resistance to criticism so strong?

Lemert (1989) argued that “A sense of service to the public is a major reason talented women and men are attracted to the profession of journalism, and a major reason many of them stay” (pp. 13-14). So when criticism suggested they were doing a disservice to the public, they found the criticism abhorrent. A former Washington Post reporter, Lou Cannon, agreed that many people became reporters “because they seek to have some impact on the world” (Hannaford, 1989, p.19). A reporter thinks he is “performing a sacred calling” that defies criticism (Hannaford, 1989, p. 19).

Another former ombudsman (Morgan, 1994) said journalists were conscientious people who realized their work is rushed, complex, full of conflicting sources, competitive and confusing. They knew those conditions could cause errors. But they feared admitting error could “open the floodgates” to criticism and, therefore, end their credibility.

More alarming was the view that objectivity, a cornerstone of journalism quality, was actually just a ritual that served to defend the profession from critics (Shoemaker, 1996). Journalists said they followed “objective” procedures, so the result could not be faulty. Shoemaker (1996) called this a “defensive routine” (p.113). Michael Schudson (1978), who studied the sociology of newspaper people, said journalists realized they could not objectively report reality, so they set up a list of procedures to follow when reporting news. Follow the procedures, reporters believed, and the end result was automatically legitimate. So any criticism of that process -- or its end result -- could threaten a journalist’s core values.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that journalists did not care about quality. For instance, Coulson and Gaziano (1989) asked staffers at two newspapers what they thought creates good newspaper content. The staffers said experienced and motivated reporters were No. 1. Next was a good rapport between editor and reporter. Next were editorial skills, sufficient time for writing, management’s emphasis on improving writing and reporters’ willingness to innovate on their writing. Three fourths of the staffers said a writing coach could be effective in a newsroom.

### **Internal Role of Ombudsmen**

In the United States, ombudsman date to the late 1960s. Most ombudsmen spent more time responding to readers’ specific complaints than critiquing the overall newspaper (Mogavero). The most official definition of an ombudsman did not even mention the internal role but related only to handling reader complaints (Organization of News Ombudsman, 2000). The organization of News Ombudsmen had about 75 members worldwide in 2001, including about 40 from the United States and about 35

from other countries, according to ONO President David Bazay (2001). So ombudsmen did not seem to be common either in the United States or in other nations.

However, some ombudsmen provided internal as well as external accountability (Pritchard, 1993, p. 19). Ombudsmen thought their presence made reporters more careful (Starck, 1999). Half the journalists surveyed at the Toronto Star (Pritchard, 1993) said the presence of an ombudsman made them more careful about their work. Staffers at newspapers with ombudsmen had a more positive view of their papers' performance than staffers at newspapers lacking an ombudsman (Pritchard, 1993).

An early study (Nelson, 1974) of ombudsmen showed that reporters at papers employing ombudsmen supported the idea of ombudsmen more than reporters at papers lacking ombudsmen. And reporters did not seem to resent their ombudsmen.

Joann Byrd, former ombudsman for The Washington Post, devoted most of her time to internal critiquing (Byrd, 1994). She said, "When I'm done reading and marking up the paper, I have individual conversations with editors and reporters, or I send individual notes or torn-up pages of the paper to staff members involved. Or I save up examples of flaws or problems and gather them up in a huge memo that goes out periodically to the whole staff and to the executives of the company" (Byrd, p. 2). The Advocate system involved similar work, except that different groups of staffers did this work each week.

Arthur Nauman, former ombudsman for the Sacramento Bee, said assessing the effect of an ombudsman was difficult. "But I like to think that if any presence (as yet another set of eyes trained on the newsroom) causes a reporter to make one additional telephone call to double- or triple-check a fact, or causes an editor to linger even one additional minute over how a story or a headline is written, then I will have done my job very well" (Nauman, 1994, p. 3).

The big rap on ombudsmen was that they let editors off the hook, allowing them to ignore complaints and avoid readers (Moses, 2000). Robert Haiman, former editor of the St. Petersburg Times, said ombudsmen insulated editors from the readers. Haiman fired his ombudsman and took gripe calls himself (Hannaford, 1986, p. 149).

Some papers hired only ombudsmen from outside the company to promote greater independence. Others said insiders know more about how the paper works and can explain it better to readers (Moses, 2000). The Advocate system relies on insiders.

The ombudsman was not a close fit to The Advocate program. Most of the work of most ombudsmen was listening to complaints, helping readers get letters published and passing on circulation calls. It was mostly an external job (Moses, 2000). A 1999 survey showed that ombudsmen saw their primary duty as handling complaints and providing readers with a voice in the newsroom (Starck, 1999). The ombudsman's goal was to improve credibility. The Advocate program's goal was to improve content. Maybe the goals, in the end, were the same – a newspaper more useful to readers – but the methods were different.

### **Relevance of Peer Evaluation**

The Advocate program was a sort of peer evaluation: People on a more-or-less equal level passed judgment on each other's work in hopes of making it better. But the literature in that area had only limited bearing on The Advocate program. Most of the research, even in writing, involved students, not professionals. And most peer evaluations were more structured than The Advocate program.

A peer acts as an audience -- someone not in authority, not previously familiar with the work being evaluated, and having no stake in it (Curtis, p. 9). This was highly

relevant to The Advocate program, which stressed that critique committee members were supposed to assume the role of newspaper reader, not authoritarian critic (Appendix A).

Peer evaluation can work because “Peer evaluation compels a writer to make a diligent effort to forecast how a reader will react to the work” (Curtis, p. 47). That was precisely the goal of The Advocate program (Lightoot, 2001, & Appendix A).

McQuarrie (1989) found that students in groups instinctively changed the way they wrote because of their concerns about how others perceive them. Curtis said students could benefit from delivering as well as receiving criticism. Critiquing others made a peer evaluator understand how an audience perceived the evaluator’s own work. Curtis called this “developing a sense of audience” (p. 8). Since The Advocate’s peer critics worked for the same organization, this tendency to improve oneself by criticizing others could be an unintended but beneficial byproduct of The Advocate program.

Other researchers, however, uncovered problems with peer evaluations. Horning (1987) found peer evaluation could produce a climate of fear. This could aggravate journalists’ already high resistance to criticism. That fear could especially repress writers’ willingness to experiment. Also, peer evaluators often feared hurting someone’s feelings or having people think they were mean or too aggressive (Curtis). Peer evaluation also could breed competition, which might or might not be good (Curtis).

What did researchers think were the keys to successful peer evaluation?

Before reading each other’s work, students need training in how to offer frank but tactful criticism: “Peer groups will not function effectively unless teachers train students in the process of evaluation and provide models for effective evaluation” (Curtis, p. 11).

The Advocate program offered vague guidelines, and the “training” lasted only a few minutes. Each week’s critique committee members got a tip sheet and a short pep talk

from the managing editor (Appendix A). Checklists also are good ideas for peer evaluation (Lamberg, 1980). The Advocate employed a brief “tip sheet,” not a checklist (Appendix A).

Warnock (1989) suggested tips for successful peer evaluation: At first writers need praise and encouragement; they then are more likely to accept constructive criticism. So the literature suggested starting with praise, then adding criticism. But even learning to praise could be hard (Curtis).

Nina Ziv (1984) suggested four levels of criticism -- conceptual, organization, sentences and word choice. This study considered those types of criticism in the questionnaire. Another study suggested three steps to successful peer evaluation: detecting a problem, diagnosing the problem and selecting an appropriate revision strategy (Flower, 1986). This study used those steps in a content analysis of The Advocate critiques.

### **Relevance to Accepted Principles**

What is good journalism? There is no official answer to that question because journalists are not licensed and do not adopt a specific creed. With some exceptions, The Advocate critique program purposely avoided setting standards or even telling critique committees what to look for as they reviewed the news pages. The editors rarely even commented on whether criticism was valid or followed principles of good journalism. Critics were supposed to read the paper like “regular readers,” not like editors or writing instructors. But a discussion of journalism principles could at least set a framework for studying The Advocate program.

Starting with a simple list, The Dayton Daily News’ newspapers-in-education program (2000) told its younger readers about five bedrock principles of journalism:

objectivity, accuracy, fairness, moral duty to society (ethics) and watchdog for society. The author's search of journalism textbooks, journalism studies and professional journalism web sites produced nothing more profound.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, 1995) recommended standards for journalists, but, like many journalism organizations, it focused on ethics instead of overall quality of the journalistic product. SPJ emphasized constantly seeking the truth, comprehensiveness, awareness of privacy rights, loyalty to the journalists' audience, care in choosing sources, and using journalism to help preserve freedom (such as by ensuring public access to government records and activities).

The Poynter Institute, a journalism training organization, offered three "guiding principles" for the profession: Seek truth and report it as fully as possible; act independently; and "minimize harm" to subjects of stories (Steele, 1994).

Some principles appeared to be almost universally accepted by journalists. A survey of national and local journalists by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1999, Section 1) showed that at least 97 percent of each group believed that getting facts right and getting both sides of a story were core principles of journalism. More than 80 percent of both groups said good journalism meant not printing rumors, that printing non-attributed material required at least two anonymous sources, and that the audience was the first obligation. More than 70 percent said journalists must keep their distance from people they cover, keep the business end of the newspaper out of the newsroom and remain neutral when writing stories. But fewer than half said avoiding first-person writing was important. About 85 percent called journalism a "watchdog," about 80 percent said the profession was a public service, and about 75 percent said journalism was a business enterprise too.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) challenged traditional ideas of “what makes good journalism.” The authors created a new list that left out some familiar terms. The authors concluded that “a number of familiar and even useful ideas, including fairness and balance, are too vague to rise to the level of essential elements of the profession” (p. 10).

Kovach and Rosenstiel’s guiding principle was that “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (pp. 9-10).

They offered nine ways journalists should do this:

1. Always seek the truth.
2. Be loyal to the citizens.
3. Verify.
4. Keep independent from people they cover.
5. Be an independent monitor of power.
6. Provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. Make significant information interesting and relevant to readers.
8. Keep news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Exercise personal conscience.

This list at first seemed obvious, even simplistic, and some of the items were only a little more specific than the principles the authors criticized as too vague. But these new rules did seem subject to testing. For instance, if you did not check information with sources you consider reputable, you did not verify (No. 3). If you write something important, but a typical reader did not see the importance, then you did not made the significant relevant (No. 7).

But applying these principles or any principles to The Advocate program was difficult because, although they are relatively easy to test qualitatively, they are difficult to

quantify. In addition, The Advocate program focused on results; Kovach and Rosenstiel focused largely on process. For instance, how would an Advocate critic judge whether a reporter verified information or kept his independence? Less concrete principles in other lists, such as fairness and balance, were even more difficult to quantify. But these lists were useful to discuss in interviews with the managers of The Advocate program and to prepare work on a content analysis.

### **Accepted Self-improvement Programs**

A survey of self-improvement articles in publications for media managers revealed no generally accepted ways for managers to go about improving the product. The literature did suggest that:

1. Newsroom executives got little guidance from their superiors on how to improve the news product (Fry, October 2000).

2. But they had a lot of autonomy to initiate self-improvement efforts as long as those efforts did not cost much money (Patterson, 1996).

Don Fry advised editors to “inventory what you already do competently and improve those areas” (2000, p. 24). For instance, “If some of your reporter/editor teams communicate and plan superbly, you teach the others how to imitate them” (p. 24).

Fry suggested a hands-on approach that included editors examining the quality of news copy as it reached the copy desk. Did the reporter turn in a finished product? Did a desk editor make it an even more-finished product? All staffers, even the best, “have holes in their skills and knowledge, which coaching can uncover and training can repair” (Fry, 2000, p. 25). Fry loathed internal critiques “because they traditionally turn into bloodbaths, which frighten the staff into avoiding risk” (p. 26). More effective, he said,

was public praise by management because “The staff notices, and their ambitions and efforts rise” (p.14).

Did the The Advocate critiques cause ambitions to rise? Or did they just stifle risk-taking? This study tried to address those questions.

### **Research Questions**

After reviewing the existing literature, the author believed many important questions were not answered. The Advocate program provided a chance to bridge that gap. This case study sought to answer the following questions, all suggested by the literature or by the novel circumstances of The Advocate program.

1. Did editors and rank-and-file staffers think the program improved the quality of the newspaper? If so, how? Could they provide evidence of improvement?
2. Did managers take any specific action in response to the critiques?
3. Were the perceived benefits worth the investments in time and money?
4. What were the effects on morale? Did staffers resent the criticism or the extra work, or think management was abdicating its responsibilities? Or did they appreciate the chance to have a say, take pride in their role as critic and teacher, take criticism of their own work to heart, get charged up by praise and try to learn from the mistakes and triumphs of others?
5. How would the participants hope to improve the program?
6. Is this kind of program worth repeating in other newspapers?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This case study consisted of three activities:

- A questionnaire surveying all 130 newsroom staffers on whether and how they thought the program affected news content, the overall value of the program, its effects on morale and what they thought could improve it.
- A content analysis of the critiques to determine how often critics made each kind of comment, the ratio of positive to negative comments, the value of the comments and changes in the content of the comments as the program progressed.
- Interviews with the top editors and other editors. Questions focused on the rationale and genesis of the program, whether and how they thought it improved news content (including their evidence of improvement), whether it was worth the effort and what might improve the program.

#### **Staffwide Survey**

The entire Advocate news staff was invited to participate in an online survey. Fifty items were included in the survey. Most required only clicking a box to answer but some allowed alternative responses, extended comments or short, open-ended responses (See Appendix F).

The survey instrument focused on whether staffers thought the critiques improved the content generally and where they saw specific improvement (Are headlines better? Do stories have more voices?). Other questions asked whether the critiques helped or hurt morale, whether staffers resented the work or the criticism, and whether they took the

critiques seriously. Related questions asked whether staffers changed their work habits due to the critiques. Some questions were asked more than once, but in different ways, to seek shades of opinion that might not have shown up in responses to a single version of a question.

The first step was a pilot survey based on conversations with many staffers. Twelve staffers filled out an early paper version of the survey to determine what kinds of answers to expect and to turn up gaps in the topics covered, unclear questions and other problems. This method allowed the production of a more complete and refined final survey.

The Advocate's online department posted the final version of the survey on its Internet site. Staffers received an e-mail invitation from the researcher to fill out the survey. Three reminders followed over the next two-week period. The entire survey period was three weeks. A link on each e-mail invitation took staffers to a cover page explaining the survey, then to the survey itself (Appendix F). The Advocate's online computers converted the responses to anonymous e-mail and automatically sent them to the researcher, who pasted responses into a spreadsheet for analysis.

### **Content Analysis**

Advocate critiques were, by design, loosely structured. Sometimes critics discussed several different kinds of issues in one news story. Sometimes a critic commented only on a story, a headline, a photo that accompanied a story or about the layout in general. Sometimes comments were long and detailed, or cryptic, even vague. Some noted only that something did not work; others analyzed the problem in detail. Sometimes critics offered solutions or alternatives.

Here are the questions the thesis addressed with the content analysis:

1. What types of comments were most common?

2. Did negative comments outweigh positive comments?

3. How often did comments go beyond general praise or criticism and address why an item was good or bad? And, in the case of negative comments, how often did they offer specific solutions or alternatives? This was important because praise and criticism were not the goals of the critique program. The goals were to enhance strengths and repair weaknesses.

4. Were there changes in the above factors over time? For instance, were comments more detailed or more positive in the early months or later months of the program's first year?

The first critique committee reviewed the May 24, 2000, edition of The Advocate. The period of this study was June 2000 through May 2001, a full year.

The pilot analysis involved 12 critiques, one each from 12 months, starting with the first day of July, then adding three days to the date in each succeeding month, producing critiques for the following dates: July 1, August 4, September 7, October 10, November 13, December 16, January 19, February 22, March 25, April 28, May 1, June 4. This variation on interval sampling ensured a cross-section of days of the week since a week is seven days. A cross-section of days of the week was desirable because the size of the newspaper and the features appearing in the newspaper varied by the day of the week. Using a simple random sampling method for the small sample in the pilot analysis might have produced a sample containing no critique reports from some days of the week. And some important features might have been left out of the pilot analysis, increasing the chances that the pilot survey did not accurately reflect the full range of critique reports.

Later, 56 more critiques were chosen by a random method for the full analysis.

- The unit of analysis was a “comment” -- a statement expressed by a critic about a story or part of a story, a headline, cutline, photo, graphic, layout, page, package or section. Different expressions about the same element (such as criticism of the lead of a story and praise for good quotes in the same story) counted as two units of analysis. Several items representing one idea about the same element (such as three instances of run-on sentences in one story) were counted as one unit.

Here are some examples of how this definition fit various kinds of comments:

“The headline fit the story well.” A single unit -- for the headline.

“The headline and the lead were both forceful and lively.” Two units -- one for the headline, one for the story.

“The lead was concise and the fourth graf had an excellent quote.” Two units.

“The story was too long but quotes were used effectively.” Two units.

“Quotes were used effectively in the third, fifth and seventh graf.” One unit -- one idea.

“The lead was too long, but at least it was clear.” Two units.

“The story was exciting and had great quotes, but the photos were weak.” Three units.

- Each comment was summarized on a spreadsheet so it could be classified as, for instance, punctuation, spelling, brevity, completeness and so on. Twenty-seven types of comments were coded. This was a tricky part of the analysis because The Advocate program neither suggested nor limited the types of items critics should analyze. The researcher had to develop a list of types by pilot coding about 400 critique comments, resulting in categories that attempted to cover all the possible comments.

- The content analysis recorded whether comments were positive or negative. The coder used the following definitions of positive and negative: If the critic used words that showed he favored the unit (“great job”) or his comments showed he was satisfied with the way the unit was published (“Good idea to. . .”), that was a positive comment. If the critic’s comment showed he preferred the unit had been published in a different way (“We should have talked to more people”), or not been published at all, that was a negative comment. When one unit got both a negative and positive comment (“Lead was short, attention-grabbing and to the point but left me a little confused”), both comments were recorded as separate units. Some comments were not clearly positive or negative and only noted a fact, not an opinion. Or they were simply difficult to understand, perhaps because the critic gave too little background about the item he was discussing. Items not clearly positive or negative were labeled “unclear.”

- Comments were labeled according to “depth” -- how deeply the critic analyzed the item. Depth was a way to gauge how useful the comment was to the staffers reading the comment. Generally, comments that only detected a problem were not as useful as comments that explained or diagnosed the problem. And a diagnosis was not as useful as a suggested revision -- a way to fix the problem. The content analysis included four levels of depth for negative comments and three depth levels for positive comments.

Negative Level 1 -- Detection only: Negative comments that only noted a result: “The lead was confusing.”

Negative Level 2 -- Detection/Revision obvious: Negative comments in which the revision was obvious, such as detection of typographical errors, misspellings and departures from the newspaper’s style: “‘Highway 10’ should be ‘La. 10.’”

Negative Level 3 -- Diagnosis: Negative comments that described the problem: “The lead contained too many long proper names, which made it confusing and hard to read.”

Negative Level 4 -- Revision: Negative comments that offered a solution or alternative that was not obvious by simply detecting the problem: “Next time talk to students affected by the tuition increase.” “Try rewriting the lead this way. . .”

Positive Level 1 -- Detection only: Positive comments that offered no reason for the compliment: “Good job on budget story.” “Great writing.”

Level 2 -- Diagnosis general: Positive comments that noted reasons for the compliment, but not specific enough reasons to help someone duplicate the practice: “Good job keeping all those boring budget numbers straight.” “Joe always uses very colorful words in his stories.”

Level 3 -- Diagnosis specific: Positive comments that stated reasons specific enough that they could conceivably be duplicated by the same person or another person: “Rounding off the numbers to the nearest million made them easier to read.” “Talking to lots of people -- teachers, students, parents -- let me appreciate all points of view.” “Including the phone number to call for help made the story more useful for readers.”

Positive comments had no category corresponding to Negative Level 2 (errors with obvious solutions). So there was no fourth level of depth for positive comments.

Coding was biased in favor of the highest level of depth. For instance, if the coder could imagine any way in which the comment might help someone duplicate that good practice, the unit received the highest level of depth.

- Comments for the first four months, second four months and final four months of the study period were grouped together to assess changes in the content over time.

Coding all the different types of answers was a tricky part of the analysis. Critics did not get a form or a list or limits on what they can say. They received only a memo suggesting they refrain from cruel comments, look for positive as well as negative practices, give readers enough background to understand the critic's comments and propose improvements instead of just noting deficiencies (Appendix A). The coding sheet is attached (Appendix C).

### **Interviews with Editors**

After compilation of initial results from the content analysis and the staff survey, the newspaper's managers were interviewed about the data and about what they think of the program. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

The executive editor and managing editor discussed previous self-improvement efforts as well as how and why this program got started. These two editors were asked to comment on the key results of the content analysis and staff survey. They were asked how well they liked the program and what they might do to improve it. Most importantly, they were asked about any specific actions they had taken because of the critiques. Other editors were questioned about their views of the program, especially whether they saw improvement in their subordinates' work and whether the program was worth continuing.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Survey Results

Ninety-one staffers, or 70 percent of the staff of The Advocate newsroom, responded to the survey during a three-week period. All staffers received one initial e-mail invitation and three e-mail reminders. At first some staffers had trouble linking to the survey web site at first. But glitches were repaired and staffers who asked the researcher about linking problems got a personal response. Responses were pasted into an Excel spreadsheet and statistics were calculated on SPSS software. The many comments from respondents, which were requested for several questions, were pasted together for easy reference.

The Advocate's staffers gave their critique system a modest show of support. A majority of the responding staffers answered positively to the general questions about approval and improvement. But respondents also found fault with many important elements of the program.

On the plus side:

- 67 percent said the program had improved the news product at least a little.
- 60 percent said they personally improved at least a little because of the critiques (compared with 10 percent who said they were hurt).
- 62 percent read critiques often; only 2 respondents said they never read them.
- 58 percent wanted to keep doing the critiques.

But few staffers gave the program a glowing endorsement. Only six percent said they had improved “a lot” because of the program. Three percent said the news product had

improved a lot. Asked what had gotten better because of the critiques, a majority agreed on only one item: 63 percent said compliance with the newspaper's style was better. Many said the program deflated morale, many expressed frustration at the lack of feedback from top editors, and many suggested significant changes to make the program more effective.

Considering the tradition of media workers' strong resistance to criticism, and considering the public and frequently negative comments that Advocate staffers received in the critiques, this modest endorsement seemed significant.

### **Improved or Not?**

Improving the news product was the purpose of the critique program<sup>1</sup>, so the most important finding of the survey was whether the people involved with the program thought the product improved after a year of critiquing.

Asked what they thought generally about the program's effect on the news product, only 3 percent said things were worse. But only 7 percent said the paper was "a lot" better because of the program. A quarter saw "some" improvement. "A little" was the most popular choice at 38 percent. The total portion of respondents seeing any improvement was 67 percent. A quarter saw no change at all (Table 4.1).

Asked whether specific facets of the news product had improved, an average of 69 percent saw no change in any specific item, such as typographical errors, clarity or conciseness. However, only very small numbers of staffers -- in no case more than 7 percent -- thought that any facets of the news product had gotten worse because of the critiques (Table 4.1).

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<sup>1</sup> L. Lightfoot, executive editor, interview with the author, Sept. 11, 2001.

## What Got Better

When asked what had improved, by far the most popular choice was “style.” Nearly two thirds of the respondents said compliance with style had improved (Table 4.1).

Typical style comments in the critiques included which words to capitalize or abbreviate and which titles to use for people and institutions.

The newsroom’s style rules were in two stylebooks -- the thick Associated Press stylebook and the smaller Advocate stylebook. Further style rules were unwritten or had been disseminated, formally or informally, since the newspaper printed its last stylebook. Critics usually cited specific entries in one or both of the stylebooks, or referred to oral or written additions to the published style rules. To correct the cited style error, staffers could refer to those rules the next time that style question arose. The newsroom also was undergoing a stylebook revision in the months before the survey.

So it is easy to see why style mistakes were common, why pointing out those mistakes could increase compliance with the style rules (or at least the perception of greater compliance) and why style was on the minds of staffers during this period.

Weeding out mechanical mistakes such as misspelling and typographical errors was the executive editor’s major specific goal for the critique program. But far fewer staffers saw improvement in those areas as a result of the critiques -- 41 percent and 34 percent respectively (Table 4.1).

Also interesting was the 29 percent of staffers who saw improvement in the clarity of the writing. Clarity was a major goal of the critique program and a major topic of the comments in the critiques. Clarity also is largely a matter of subjective judgment: The most obvious definition of clarity used at The Advocate was simply whether a

**Table 4.1**

**What's Better, What's Worse, What's Not Changed**

**Generally, do you think the critiques have improved the news coverage?**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
A lot	3	3.3	See some improvement	63	67.0
Some	23	25.3			
A little	35	38.5			
Not at all	24	26.4	No change -- or worse	30	33.0
Made it worse	6	6.6			

N=91

**How do you think the critiques have affected the following items?**

<b>Critiques made these items ...</b>	<b>Better</b>		<b>Worse</b>		<b>No change</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Compliance with style	57	62.6	2	2.2	32	35.2
Spelling	37	40.7	1	1.1	53	58.2
Typos	31	34.1	3	3.3	57	62.6
Clarity of writing	26	28.6	4	4.4	61	67.0
Completeness of stories	22	24.2	2	2.2	67	73.6
Getting multiple voices in stories	21	23.1	2	2.2	67	73.6
Minority voices in stories	14	15.4	1	1.1	76	83.5
Quality of headlines	17	18.7	3	3.3	71	78.0
Quality of cutlines, taglines	17	18.7	6	6.6	68	74.7
Quality of layouts	16	17.6	4	4.4	70	77.8
Minority voices in stories	14	15.4	1	1.1	76	83.5
More "regular people" in stories	12	13.3	4	4.4	74	81.3
Diversity of stories	10	11.1	4	4.4	77	84.6
Editors' relations w/subordinates	9	9.9	19	20.9	63	69.2
Relations among news desks	8	9.0	21	23.6	60	67.4
Enthusiasm in the newsroom	8	8.9	40	44.4	42	46.7

N=91

particular critic understood or did not understand a word, phrase, sentence or story.

Improving clarity often is not just a matter of consulting a stylebook or dictionary. Clarity frequently requires finding more information or laboring over a keyboard, seeking a better way to explain a complex issue. So a perception by many that the newspaper was producing clearer information for its readers seems significant.

### **Personal Improvement**

Did the staffers think they, personally, got better because of the critiques?

Only 6 percent said their work improved “a lot” because of the critiques, but 55 percent said they improved “a little.” So 61 percent said they were better because of the critiques. The rest said they had not improved. Asked if the critiques had hurt their work, only 10 percent said yes and 90 percent said no (Table 4.2). “I know I try harder to make my writing livelier,” one respondent wrote in an open-ended question on the survey.

Several respondents added comments that argued strongly for the positive effects of the program. “Knowing there will be a critique makes me edit it one more time,” said one editor. “I feed off praise and work for it,” said a writer. A third greatly changed his or her work habits: “Now I think about how the critiquers might view something. For instance, will they think it is clear? Did we cover all the bases? Is the good stuff up high?”

Similarly, another said, “I try to pay more attention to both details and the big picture.”

And another seemed to catch the exact spirit the management intended: “When a critiquer likes something I write, I make a mental note that that worked.”

Older and senior staffers saw more value in the program. Among respondents under 40 years old, 57 percent said the program helped improve things at least a little, far less than the 77 percent of those over 40 who said it helped. Among staffers with less than 10 years’ service at the paper, 63 percent said the program helped, compared with 75 of the

more senior employees. Among 10-year-plus employees, 63 percent wanted to continue the program, compared with 51 percent of more junior employees. However, the different age groups showed almost no difference on this point: 57 percent of respondents under 40 wanted to continue, compared with 60 percent of those over 40 (Table 4.3).

Less experienced staffers reported no more self-improvement out of the critiques than veterans. Among staffers under 40 years old, 63 percent said the critiques improved them at least a little, compared with the 64 percent of staffers over 40 who thought they improved. Staffers at the paper less than 10 years or more than 10 years also showed almost identical views on the personal value of the critiques (Table 4.3).

Older and younger workers read the critiques with about the same regularity. Fifty-seven percent of the staffers under 40, and 67 percent of those over 40, said they read the critiques often. Also similar was the comparison between staffers at the paper less than 10 years or 10-plus years (Table 4.3).

### **Gripes: Defensiveness and Absent Editors**

Despite the modest show of support for the critiques, staffers had deep reservations about the program. Most focused on two complaints: an expected strong defensiveness about criticism and the management's lack of involvement in the program.

Staffers did not claim to be perfect at their jobs. They were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with several statements, with 5 labeled "strongly agree" and 1 labeled "strongly disagree." Some 77 percent marked a 4 or 5 -- that is, they strongly agreed or somewhat agreed -- with the statement that "We all need criticism to get better" (Table 4.4).

But exactly the same portion of staffers agreed that "critiques make people defensive." Some said the morale effects weighed down the critiques more than any

**Table 4.2**

**The Critiques and Improvement**

**Have the critiques improved your work?**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes, a lot	5	5.7
Yes, a little	48	54.5
No, not at all	35	39.8

N=88

**Have the critiques hurt your work?**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	8	9.5
No	76	90.5

N=84

**Generally, do you think the critiques have improved the news coverage?**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
A lot	3	3.3	Some improvement	63	67.0
Some	23	25.3			
A little	35	38.5	No change -- or worse	30	33.0
Not at all	24	26.4			
Made it worse	6	6.6			

N=91

<b>Staffers agreeing with these statements:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
We all need criticism to get better.	70	76.9
Critiques are a poor substitute for editors doing their jobs.	56	59.3
Critics often don't understand my work.	40	44.4
The critiques make me more careful about my work.	40	44.4
Critiques keep people on their toes	26	28.6

N=90

**Table 4.3**

**Comparing Older and Younger Staffers**

Age	Say critiques have helped		Read critiques regularly		Want to keep critiques		Improved their work	
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Under 40	20	57.1	20	57.1	20	57.1	22	62.9
Over 40	37	76.6	31	67.0	28	59.6	28	63.6
Total	57	68.3	51	62.2	48	58.5	50	63.3

$t=12.217$   $df=81$   $p<.001$      
 $t=-8.109$   $df=81$   $p<.001$      
 $t=-2.019$   $df=81$   $p=.047$      
 $t=8.750$   $df=78$   $p<.001$

**Comparing Junior and Senior Staffers**

Tenure	Say critiques have helped		Read critiques regularly		Want to keep critiques		Improved their work	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
0-9 years	27	62.7	28	65.1	22	51.2	26	60.4
10+ years	32	74.5	26	60.5	27	62.8	24	60.0
Total	59	68.6	54	62.7	49	57.0	50	60.2

$t=13.104$   $df=81$   $p<.001$      
 $t=-8.505$   $df=85$   $p<.001$      
 $t=-.865$   $df=85$   $p=.390$      
 $t=10.167$   $df=82$   $p<.001$

improvements could justify. Asked to choose from a list of possible downsides of the program, two thirds of the respondents checked “defensiveness among staffers.” That is by far the most-often-cited problem they noted with the program. However, only a fifth of the respondents agreed that two similar problems, “unnecessary embarrassment” and critics picking on people they don’t like, were byproducts of the program (Table 4.4).

Several staffers added comments to explain why they hate being critiqued. “Usually, it’s not critique. It degenerates into nitpicking,” said one respondent who reported reading the critiques rarely. A few said they simply didn’t need anyone looking over their shoulders. “I’m my own critic. I judge my own work and I know when I’ve screwed up,” said one. Most caustic were comments that suggested some staffers were not competent to judge others’ work. “Critiques often include misinformation and often show the writer does not understand the process of putting out a newspaper,” was a typical complaint. Many simply did not buy the idea that the critics need not be experts on someone’s work because they were supposed to take the role of regular reader, not expert consultant or authoritarian editor. Said one: “I’m not necessarily interested in what a typist thinks about a story.” Some said the defensiveness was justified when critics ignored major successes and instead focused on small failures. “Often very good stories by good writers get no positive feedback while the critique points out a typo. This is very bad for the morale of someone who has just worked hard on a story,” one respondent said.

Only 8 percent of the respondents agreed said critiques “boost morale.” Only 9 percent said “enthusiasm in the newsroom” was better due to the critiques. Five times as many, 44 percent, said enthusiasm was lower because of the critiques (Table 4.4). Just

**Table 4.4**

**The Critiques and Morale**

<b>Staffers agreeing with these statements:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Critiques make people defensive	68	76.7
Critiques are just someone's opinion.	62	68.1
The critiques show my newspaper cares about quality	42	46.2
Critiques give staffers a voice in the newspaper.	41	45.1
Critiquing is a good use of staffers' time.	30	33.0
Critiques boost morale.	7	7.7

N=91

<b>Staffers saying the critiques cause these problems:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Defensiveness among staffers	60	65.9
More tension in the newsroom	25	27.5
Less creativity for fear of being criticized	22	24.2
Unnecessary embarrassment	19	20.9
Critiquers pick on people they don't like	18	19.8
Other problems not listed	27	29.7

N=91

**How staffers think conditions have changed because of the critiques:**

	<b>Better</b>		<b>Worse</b>		<b>No change</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Editors' relations with subordinates	9	9.9	19	20.9	63	69.2
Relations among news desks	8	8.9	21	23.6	60	67.4
Enthusiasm in the newsroom	8	8.9	40	44.4	42	46.7

N=91

<b>Staffers favoring these changes:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Use critiques to reward good work	30	33.0
Use critiques to penalize bad work	17	18.7
Don't mention reporters' names in the critiques	13	14.3
Identify the people who write the critiques	12	13.2

N=91

getting a call to be on a critique committee “puts me in a funk,” one staffer said.

However, a few said they grew tired of all the defensive comments they heard about the critiques. If news people can’t handle criticism, said one, “they need to be in another line of work.” And most respondents noted at least some morale-boosting effects of the program. Three in five respondents “like to see my work noticed” and reported they “usually get more positive than negative comments” when their work did get notice in the critiques. Close to half said critiques made them more careful about their own work; only 29 percent said the critiques “keep people on their toes” (Table 4.2). Yet 45 percent said critics often misunderstood their work (Table 4.4).

The management’s laid-back attitude about the critiques irritated some staffers. The managing editor and executive editor did not participate regularly in the process except to put together the critique reports for distribution. An analysis of a large sample of the critique reports turned up only a handful of comments from the management. Usually the top editors’ comments in critique reports either noted that a critic’s comment was factually incorrect or defended a policy that a critic had attacked.

Six in 10 respondents agreed the critiques “are a poor substitute for editors doing their jobs” (Table 4.2). Only a third agreed that critiquing “is a good use of staffers’ time.” Half wanted the top editors to say if they agreed or disagreed with critique comments (Table 4.4). Some said the management’s hands-off attitude reduced the program’s credibility.

“I would be more attentive to a critique from the managing editor,” one commented. Perhaps most importantly, 67 percent of the respondents suggested the management set up a system to turn comments into concrete improvements. Of all the possible changes listed in the survey, that one received the most support (Table 4.5).

Some staffers added comments criticizing the management's lack of action. "Critiques have no real impact because top editors do not seize or ever run with the bold ideas," said one. "The problem isn't the critique program itself but the lack of changes effected as a result," said another.

On the other hand, staffers to some degree seemed to covet their own power as critics. Asked if only editors, instead of everybody, should do the critiques, only one in four agreed. Asked if editors should weed out "off-base" comments before distributing the critiques, less than a majority agreed even though many staffers complained about incorrect or unfair comments. And, despite many staffers' complaints about recycling the same comments over and over, only 32 percent wanted the management to strip out especially repetitive comments before distributing the critiques (Table 4.5).

#### **Comments: Heartfelt to Caustic**

Several survey questions invited comments, and many staffers expressed deep reservations or outright cynicism about the program and its ability to improve the newspaper. However, many staffers defended the program as a good-faith effort to improve the paper and said they appreciate a chance to improve themselves too even as they noted significant weaknesses and suggested major changes.

A majority of the respondents added comments after a question asking them how often they read the critiques. "You read them once and you don't need to read them again. They're repetitious," said one. Some suggested the critiques were either an insult to the staff or a sad commentary on the paper's quality. "We should hire people who are competent to do their job and not rely on critiques," said one. Another summed up many responses: "Critiques make me angry when they're nitpicky or personal or erroneous. Bad outweighs the good." Many respondents said they simply did not have the time or

did not think the investment was worth the time. Some noted that critiques could be lengthy to read.

But most staffers -- 62 percent -- said they read the critiques regularly and gave reasons for doing so (Table 4.6). Some frequent readers of the critiques said they were interested in getting better or making the paper better. Ask why he or she read the critique reports, one respondent said simply: "Interested in quality." Some were selective: One read only comments that seemed to come from other "NEWS writers" (respondents' emphasis) and another looked for comments "that might apply to me or the way I do my job."

"Pick up tips" was the reason a few said they read the critiques. Others said writing and reading the critiques taught them more about the newspaper's operation. Some simply found the comments interesting. Others said they considered reading critiques part of their jobs. Several said they looked first to see if their work was mentioned, then sought out anything else that looked interesting. A few noted the ease of reading the e-mailed critique reports.

### **The Consensus: Keep It But Fix It**

Asked whether they would stop or continue the critiques, 58 percent said yes and 42 percent said no -- a show of support that surprised the management (Table 4.5). Many obviously had given the matter some thought because more than two thirds of the staffers who answered the question also wrote reasons for their views.

Staffers in favor of ending the critiques said the program, after a year, reaped all the benefits it could possibly achieve. "It already has served its purpose. We need to move on and develop another method of praising/correcting individuals," one commented.

**Table 4.5**

**Keeping/Improving the Critiques**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>58.3</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>41.8</b>

N=91

<b>Number of staffers favoring these changes:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Set up a system to root out frequently cited problems	61	67.0
Focus more on big picture (story play, bias, effectiveness of layouts, etc.)	55	60.4
Ask some subscribers to critique the paper	46	50.5
Have editors say if they agree or disagree with the critiques	45	49.5
Get more feedback from top editors	43	47.3
Do critiques less often (not every day)	41	45.1
Have editors delete off-base comments before distributing critiques	40	44.0
Use critiques to reward good work	30	33.0
Don't keep repeating the same criticisms over and over	29	31.9
Require critics to suggest solutions or alternatives	28	30.8
Focus more on details (grammar, typos, accuracy, etc.)	24	26.4
Focus on specific issues instead of the entire news product	23	25.3
Have editors, not everybody, do the critiques	23	25.3
Use critiques to penalize bad work	17	18.7
Don't mention reporters' names in the critiques	13	14.3
Identify the people who write the critiques	12	13.2

N=91

“The consensus seems to be that the critiques have outlived their usefulness,” said another. “It does nothing to improve what’s really wrong with the paper.” One of the more caustic critics said: “Only a moron would waste time on this screwy critique system.”

Why keep them? Why not? was the answer from several respondents. “They are fun,” said a few staffers. “It never hurts to stop and take a look at what’s in the paper,” said one. “All newspapers need constant review to avoid slipping into bad habits that are never addressed,” cautioned another. “Many of the critiques are useless. But many are useful. So let’s keep it.” “We are a monopoly. No one else can police the paper but us . . . . That’s why we need to keep looking at our work,” said another.

Many endorsed the program with conditions or reservations. A common suggestion was a call to pay less attention to mechanics and more to meatier journalism. “If improved, it could be a useful tool to improve the paper. Now they’re kind of like the editing class I took in college: Find Waldo (i.e., the error),” one respondent said. “We need the minutiae, but we don’t need to dwell on it. More important is substantive analysis of why a story is good or not so good, why it does or doesn’t succeed. Is the story too long (most are)? Does it say anything? Why it is in the paper? I seldom come away from reading a critique with anything substantive to think about.”

Two changes seemed to enjoy strong support. Setting up some system to root out problems frequently cited in the critiques won favor from 67 percent of the respondents. However, none suggested any detailed plan. Other responses showed little support for some possibilities, such as using the critiques to punish errant staffers or reward those who receive praise. Secondly, some 60 percent of the respondents said the critiques

**Table 4.6**

**Interest in the Critiques**

**How often do you read the critiques?**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Read all, or almost all	24	26.4	Regular readers	66	61.5
Read them often	32	35.2			
Read them sometimes	17	18.7	Not regular readers	35	38.5
Skim them occasionally	16	17.6			
Don't read them at all	2	2.2			

N=91

**Number of staffers agreeing with these statements:**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Critiques are just someone's opinion.	62	68.1
I like to see my work noticed.	54	60.0
They take too much time to write.	52	58.4
Critique reports are usually easy to understand.	48	52.7
I usually just read critiques about my own work.	40	44.9
Critiques take too much time to read.	36	39.6

N=91

should focus more on “the big picture,” such as the fairness of coverage, how well layouts work and whether stories get appropriate play (Table 4.5).

Half or close to half the respondents endorsed four other ideas: Asking subscribers to participate in some way, hearing more from editors about whether they agree with the comments in the critiques, doing the critiques less often than every day, and having editors delete “off-base” comments before distributing the critique reports (Table 4.5).

Asked for other, unlisted alternatives or improvements, several staffers made the following suggestions:

- A weekly newsletter discussing one issue or problem in depth “instead of nit-picking everything.”
- Supervisors marking up stories or pages, then discussing the problems with staffers.
- Accountability for the critics: “Have a meeting once a week where critics would be required to read their criticism aloud -- and answer to feedback. If we’re going to have a bloodbath, we ought to at least do it right.”
- A group meeting once a week instead of critics making daily, solitary reports.
- “Make a list of common errors. Cite examples. Post on the bulletin board.”
- “Take the critiques already done, find the patterns of weakness, focus on improving them as an ongoing priority.”
- “Do a better job of critiquing the paper BEFORE it goes to bed.”

The survey turned up some seemingly contradictory opinions but also a consensus that, although imperfect, often frustrating and sometimes unfair, the critique program was probably worth keeping in hopes it could produce modest improvement. As one respondent wrote, “The critiques are a good idea that needs tweaking.”

## Content Analysis Results

During the first year of the critique program, staffers wrote and received about 335 days' worth of critiques (The critique committees skipped about 30 days because of holidays or other busy or confusing periods).

Five critiques of each month were randomly selected. If that sample failed to produce at least 100 units of analysis for one month, then further sampling produced a sixth critique for that month. The content analysis included 1,561 comments from 68 daily critique reports, thus cataloging roughly 20 percent of the total critiques during the 12 months. (Appendix D).

The analysis coded the comments in five ways:

1. Date, to study changes in the comments over time.
2. Type of element, that is, did the comment involve body type, photos, headlines, graphics, layout, an entire section or an entire page or package.
3. Type of comment. The pilot testing produced a list of 27 types of comments, most of which could be grouped into three categories: (1) comments that expressed favor but did not suggest why (e.g., "It was good"), (2) comments that involved mechanics such as style or punctuation or missing borders, and (3) comments involving substantial issues such as fairness, liveliness and completeness. A small number of comments were too unclear to put into a type, and a smaller number were specific but did not fit any of the categories produced by the pilot analysis.
4. Whether the comment was positive or negative.
5. The depth of a comment, a gauge of how helpful it might be to a staffer reading it.

Depth was judged by standards that awarded comments the highest possible level of depth. For instance, if the critic said a story was "good" or "well-written" or "well done,"

that comment was coded at the first, lowest level of depth. But a comment giving the slightest explanation (such as “it was informative” or “there were lots of good details”) was coded at the second, higher level of depth. If a comment gave any explanation that could conceivably help anyone repeat the good work in the future (such as “short words and sentences made the story very clear”), that comment was coded at the third, highest level of depth. This methodology allowed for some gray areas that invited subjective decisions by the coder, whose work also was complicated by the informal and unstructured nature of the critiques. Those factors indicated that accurately gauging “depth” would be difficult.

Coder reliability was indeed low for the “depth” categories. A fellow journalist familiar with newspaper practices and terminology was briefed on this study’s methodology. She then coded 100 items that the researcher also had coded. The researcher and the fellow journalist agreed 99 percent of the time on whether comments were positive or negative. Also high was the 93 percent reliability of the coding of broad types of comments (mechanics, substance, “good,” etc.). But, as feared, the important but difficult-to-code issue of depth produced lower reliability. On positive comments, the fellow journalist and the researcher agreed only 72 percent of the time that a comment fit one of the three categories: vague praise, specific praise, or praise detailed enough to allow someone to reproduce the praised practice. On negative comments, the agreement was a higher 86 percent even though there were four categories: vague criticism, detailed criticism, criticism in which the revision was obvious (such as typos and style errors) and criticism that suggested a solution or alternative.

Units of analysis averaged 23 for each day’s critique report. The number of comments for each day ranged from a low of five to a high of more than 50. Assuming

that 23 comments was about the daily average for the entire year, then Advocate staffers made about 7,700 comments about their colleagues' work during the year.

### **Balance of Positive and Negative**

The most basic finding was the ratio of positive to negative comments. The literature suggested that peer reviews could become overly mean and negative, or they can turn into soft songs of praise. Either result could make a peer review program less beneficial. The Advocate program reached a balance: 47 percent positive comments and 52 percent negative. One percent of the comments were too vague to tell if they were negative or positive (Table 4.7).

More striking was the positive shift in the critiques over time. During the first four months of the program, staffers wrote nearly two negative comments for every positive comment -- a ratio of 65 percent to 35 percent. During the next four months, the ratio grew more equal -- 48 percent positive to 51 percent negative. During the final four months, the ratio was 56 percent positive to 42 percent negative (Table 4.7).

Editors at The Advocate were hesitant to guess the reasons for the trend toward more positive comments. Possibilities include:

- Improvement: Maybe the later papers had fewer problems to cite. The survey does indicate that most staffers saw at least a little improvement that they credited to the critiques.
- Fatigue: Staffers might have grown tired of the program and taken it less seriously to the point that they made easy, positive comments instead of taking the time to look more closely for problems.
- Open-mindedness: Staffers might have focused on all their pet peeves during their

**Table 4.7**

**Positive vs. Negative Comments**

<b>Frequency of:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive comments	728	46.6
Negative comments	812	52.0
Can't tell; too vague	21	1.3

N=1,561

**Positive and negative comments during each period of the study:**

	<b>June-Sept.</b>		<b>Oct.-Jan.</b>		<b>Feb.-May</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Positive comments	181	34.7	220	48.2	327	56.0	728	46.6
Negative comments	337	64.7	231	50.7	244	41.8	812	52.0
Can't tell	3	.6	5	1.1	13	2.2	21	1.3

$\chi^2=60.89$  df=4 p<.001

first stint on a critique committee, then looked more openly at the material during their second or third assignment to a committee.

- Management intervention: At a few points during the first year of the program, the management encouraged staffers to seek positive as well as negative comments.

- Peer pressure: The managing editor theorized that critics gradually copied the styles of previous critics, producing gradually more and more similar critique reports. Perhaps a short-term trend toward more positive critiques turned into a longer trend as critics picked up that more positive attitude, and critics that followed them continued the attitude.

### **Coding Complications**

The bulk of the comments -- 77 percent -- involved body type, which includes news and feature stories, opinion articles, lists and photo captions. Photos and headlines, although crucial elements of a newspaper, were the subject of only 6 and 5 percent of the comments respectively. Graphics -- any body type in a box or any other presentation outside the usual copy style, or any mixture of type and art -- accounted for 5 percent of the comments. Critics rarely mentioned pages, packages and entire sections.

Some pieces of copy received several comments each. For instance, a critic might comment that a news story was informative overall, that it contained a lot of lively quotes, that it lacked sufficient explanation of the mayor's proposal and that it contained two different kinds of style errors. That article would produce five units of analysis.

The list of possible comment types ended up heavily weighted toward copy. For instance, only one type of comment -- technical problems such as crooked headlines and poor reproduction -- did not apply to copy. But many types of comments, such as validity of sources and compliance with style, could not apply to photos. In short, comments

about copy dominate the critique reports. But, like the critiques themselves, this analysis mixes in all elements when making most of the analyses.

A further complication was that comment categories about substance usually could be either positive or negative. For instance, a story might have been very complete or very incomplete. Both comments would go into the category “completeness.” However, most comments about mechanics rarely applied to positive comments. For instance, no one noted when someone used correct grammar; they only noted grammar problems.

### **Types of Comments**

The most common type of comment was one the coder labeled “good.” Seventeen percent of the comments overall, and 37 percent of the positive comments, simply expressed favor with something in the newspaper without giving any reason for the compliment (Table 4.8). Comments such as “It was interesting” or “The story was well-written” are in this category. However, comments that were only slightly more informative, such as “It was concise” or “It was lively,” went into another category.

The Advocate’s top editors, during the year examined, frequently expressed frustration about the high number of vaguely positive comments. They urged members of critique committees to be more specific (Appendix A). But the vague praise continued and even increased slightly throughout the study period (Table 4.9).

The next most popular comments were about the substance of the newspaper: completeness, 11 percent; clarity, 10 percent; and liveliness, 9 percent. Most of these comments, both positive and negative, were about writing. But headlines, photos and even layouts received a number of comments about being lively or dull. All of these types received a substantial number of both negative and positive comments.

The next most popular comments, at 5 percent of the total, were style (almost always style errors and thus almost always a negative comment) and emphasis (stressing the right or wrong things or giving a story proper or improper play in the newspaper). At 4 percent was “informative,” a fuzzy category, almost always positive, that included all comments that used that word or its variations. Also at 4 percent were redundancy (defined as anything in the unit that was not needed) and typographical errors. Some important substantial and mechanical issues were not the subject of many comments. Only 2 percent of the comments, for instance, involved accuracy, often called the most basic tenet of journalism. Only 2 percent involved spelling, a basic issue in any writing. More abstract issues such as “fairness-balance-objectivity” (a single category) and more diversity in story topics accounted for only 1 percent of the comments each.

Making judgments about the frequency of certain comments is difficult. One cannot say, for instance, that Advocate staffers did not care about fairness or spelling. Perhaps they just did not notice many misspelled words. The survey results also suggested some staffers were frustrated with “picky” comments about style and typos. Perhaps some intentionally ignored mechanical problems and instead focused on bigger-picture items.

Some comment categories also were more subjective. Spelling is straightforward; conciseness is a judgment call. And some comments are difficult to make intelligently without more information than the newspaper provided. How, for instance, could a critic judge the accuracy of a story if he or she had no other information to compare with that story? By contrast, most style uses are clearly right or wrong. You can look them up.

Grouping the types of comments into super-categories allowed more enlightening analysis. The vague praise remained in one category. Other comments went into

**Table 4.8****Types of Comments**

<b>Comments in each category</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Substance (Clarity, fairness, organization, etc.)	873	55.9
Mechanics (typos, spelling, grammar, etc.)	386	24.7
“Good” -- no specifics	262	16.8
Other	21	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,542</b>	<b>98.7</b>

<b>Comments in each sub-category</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Category</b>
"Good" – no specifics ("I liked it")	262	16.8	“Good”
Completeness (complete or incomplete)	167	10.7	Substance
Clarity (clear, unclear)	161	10.3	Substance
Liveliness (boring or lively)	132	8.5	Liveliness
Style (Advocate style or Associated Press style)	73	4.7	Mechanics
Emphasis (stressed right or wrong thing; poor play)	72	4.6	Substance
Typographical errors	66	4.2	Mechanics
Informative (or not)	61	3.9	Substance
Redundancy (anything not needed)	56	3.6	Mechanics
Relevance to a reader (relevant or not relevant)	53	3.4	Substance
Technical (headline crooked, border missing, etc.)	51	3.3	Mechanics
Grammar	50	3.1	Mechanics
Organization (well-organized, poorly organized)	48	3.1	Substance
Punctuation	48	3.1	Mechanics
Voices (enough voices? appropriate voices?)	39	2.5	Substance
Conciseness	38	2.4	Substance
Accuracy	30	1.9	Substance
Spelling	29	1.9	Mechanics
Other (comment does not fit any topic on the list)	21	1.3	Other
Fairness/objectivity/balance	19	1.2	Substance
Coder did not understand the comment	19	1.2	Vague
Examples or anecdotes (had them or lacked them)	14	.9	Substance
Mood, tone (right or wrong)	13	.8	Substance
Active/passive voice	13	.8	Mechanics
Jargon	12	.8	Substance
Diversity (all kinds: race, geography, story topics)	11	.7	Substance
Validity of sources	3	.1	Substance
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,561</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

**Table 4.9**

**Change in Frequency of Types of Comments**

**Number and type of comments during each period of the analysis**

	June-Sept.		Oct.-Jan.		Feb.-May	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Substance	251	48.2	263	57.7	359	61.5
Mechanics	184	35.3	107	23.5	95	16.3
"Good"	78	15.0	74	16.2	110	18.8
Other	3	.6	10	2.2	8	1.4
Vague	5	1.0	2	.1	12	2.1
TOTAL	521	100.0	456	100.0	584	100.0

$\chi^2=63.102$  df=8 p<.001

super-categories called “mechanics” and “substance.” The pattern was evident: 56 percent of the comments involved substance and 25 percent involved mechanics. The rest were miscellaneous praise, too vague to classify or did not fit the classifications (Table 4.8). Those figures suggest the staff members did not just pounce on typos or pat their friends on the back but, more than half the time, addressed more complex or subtle issues such as accuracy and the liveliness of writing and headlines.

### **Gauging the Value of the Comments**

However, achieving a good mix of substantial and mechanical issues, or even a good mix of positive and negative comments, was not the ultimate goal of The Advocate program. The goal was to improve the paper. To do that the critiques had to give staffers information that they could use to improve their work. For the purpose of this study, “depth” was the degree to which a critic analyzed a unit. Shallow analysis did not give staffers enough information to understand a defect or to appreciate a piece of good work. Deeper analysis helped staffers understand why a critic liked or did not like something. Even deeper analysis helped them to avoid the cited errors or to duplicate the praised work in the future.

Only 2 percent of negative comments ended up in the category of plain, unexplained dislike. About a quarter of the comments diagnosed a problem but did not propose a solution. For example, some critics complained about use of jargon but did not offer an alternative to the jargon. More than four in ten comments had an obvious solution such as spelling the errant word correctly or following some capitalization style (see Table 4.10, “Total” column).

About three out of ten negative comments proposed a solution that was not obvious. These are the comments that potentially held the most value for staffers. Typical

comments in this category offered a rewritten lead, moved information higher or lower in a story or suggested seeking students, not just bureaucrats, to comment on college tuition increases (Table 4.10, “Total” column).

Coding was different for positive comments, and the results were quite different. Some 37 percent of the positive comments merely commended the unit without offering any reasons. That is a striking figure next to the 2 percent of undiagnosed negative comments. A common comment in this category seemed like an obligatory, complimentary first reference so the critic could then launch into criticism with a clear conscience. A typical comment: “The Metro Council story was good, but it was very confusing.” Some vague praise suggested that the critic did not actually read the story, that the critic could not get his hands around a reason for liking it or that he was just looking for nice things to say.

Nearly half the positive comments expressed some reason for the praise – but not in sufficient detail to help a staff member duplicate the good work. Extremely common were comments such as “It had all the information I needed” or “the writing was very colorful.” These comments might have been helpful in some cases. However, rarely did critics include portions of a story in their critique reports, so readers often had little clue about what language the critic considered colorful or what facts were so informative. Only one positive comment in seven scored the highest level of depth – sufficient information to help someone repeat the good practice. One comment in this category advised staffers to use the active voice, gave reasons for that view and listed some examples from the story to show how effective active voice can be. Other helpful comments were less ambitious, only noting, for instance, that it was nice to see that a photographer had cruised a part of town the newspaper rarely covered in search of feature

photos. That practice could be duplicated if that photographer or another one decided the next day to seek out another area of town that the newspaper seldom depicts in its photos. Another frequent comment noted that the writer sought out many different kinds of people to comment on an issue rather than stick to a couple of regular sources. Other examples of deep, positive comments: A critic noted that using a cliché in a lead (“throw stones”) actually made a story more inviting because the phrase was very well known to readers and actually applied to the situation described in the story. Another story, after describing a social problem, clearly listed ways for victims to get help. One complex comment praised a photographer for including many identifiable people in a photo but not identifying them. The lack of identifications violated the newspaper’s style but, in this case, made the photo livelier because a long list of names would have weighed down the cutline, the critic said. One critic was happy to see a profile of an athlete who was not a star on the team but had an interesting life anyway. Another was pleased that a writer resisted the temptation to write a “cute” lead, choosing instead to start the story with a clear explanation of the effects on the newspaper’s readers.

### **Interviews with Editors**

In February 2001, more than 20 editors working at The Advocate gathered for a retreat to discuss, among other things, the critique program. After the discussion, Executive Editor Linda Lightfoot called for a vote on who thought it was time to end the program after seven months. No one raised a hand. The senior editors, Lightfoot and Managing Editor Jim Whittum, also wanted to continue the program. They expressed mild, pleasant surprise with the results of this study’s staff survey and did not object to

**Table 4.10**

**Change in Depth of Positive and Negative Comments**

**Number of *positive* comments at each level of depth during each period**

	June-Sept.		Oct.-Jan.		Feb.-May		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Detect only	83	46.6	81	37.0	101	30.6	265	36.5
Detect and describe	74	41.6	98	44.7	180	54.5	352	48.4
Describe well enough to duplicate	21	11.8	40	18.3	49	14.8	110	15.1

$\chi^2=15.81$  df=4 p=.003

**Number of *negative* comments at each level of depth during each period**

	June-Sept.		Oct.-Jan.		Feb.-May		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Detect only	6	1.8	4	1.7	3	1.2	13	1.6
Detect/solution obvious	185	54.4	95	39.9	69	28.6	349	42.6
Diagnose	76	22.4	53	22.3	85	35.3	214	26.1
Suggest solution	70	20.6	84	35.3	84	34.9	233	29.1

$\chi^2=50.20$  df=6 p<.001

most of the criticisms of the critique program, including criticism that the top editors played too limited a role.

Whittum recounted the history of self-improvement efforts at The Advocate during an interview with the researcher. Whittum said that, about 10 years ago, he asked eight to 10 selected employees, in the newsroom and in other departments, to read the newspaper and discuss its good and bad points during weekly meetings. He wrote reports based on those discussions and distributed them to the staff. He eventually had trouble finding non-news employees willing to invest the time, he said. He also said news staffers resisted suggestions, saying, “Who are these people to criticize my work?” A later effort, also called a critique, invited all newsroom staffers to clip stories or other elements of the paper they liked or disliked, write a note about them and toss the clip and note into a cardboard box. Critiques were read at news meetings and posted, with no editing or censorship, on a wall in the newsroom. Whittum said the public posting, which included reporters’ bylines and often-caustic comments, produced great resentment. Gradually, fewer people contributed and the practice died out. “Snippiness killed it, and there was much less participation after a while. And largely, if not exclusively, it was negative,” Whittum said.

Lightfoot said the latest critique program was a result of frustration with errors in the newspaper. “People kept coming up to me at places and talking to me about the number of grammatical errors in the newspaper,” she said. So she began to survey the readership. “As I did research, I found that poor use of language and grammar has an effect on our readership. That’s when I began to think about what I could do about this, short of going out there and showing this (errors in the newspaper) to copy editors,” she said.

Discussions with her editors focused at first on grammatical concerns. Then Lightfoot heard complaints about stories being unclear, so she added clarity to the mix. “Then the feedback I got from the editors was, “You have to say something positive. People felt strongly that it shouldn’t be just negative criticism.”

Lightfoot said the program was a result of discussions at The Advocate only. It did not result either from discussions with other editors about what they tried nor from any literature she read on self-improvement issues. However, “I have learned from (attending editors’) conferences that a number of editors share the same concern I have.”

The latest critique program developed over a few meetings with her editors. They decided to involve all staffers except for the top two editors and decided against formal training except for a one-page guide (Appendix A). Said Lightfoot:

“Maybe lack of training is good. What I kind of wanted was for people to react like readers. I wanted them to tell me if stories were not clear to them and how you could make it clear to them. If they liked a story, I wanted them to tell us why they liked it and what the writer did that worked well.”

### **Editors Favor the Program**

Lightfoot was pleased with the solid majority of respondents who saw at least “a little” improvement in the paper due to the critiques. “I’ll take ‘a little.’ I think that’s a positive,” Lightfoot said. “If that many people think it’s a positive, why not do it?” She said expecting major improvements would have been unrealistic. “It’s all tiny; it’s all incremental,” she said. “It’s not this huge overnight change.”

Results of interviews with several lower-level editors showed similar attitudes. The critique was worth trying, at least in the absence of something better, they said. “It’s especially important because we don’t have employee evaluations and we don’t always have time to tell a reporter what we think,” said one. “I think all the people in the

newsroom feel like they have an ownership ... I think it's good like it is," said another editor. "It makes us read the paper. I never read sports until I had to critique the sports section," said another.

But several editors suggested changes, most notably by the top editors above them. Like the staff as a whole, the lower-level editors were frustrated by the lack of feedback from the top. "It's hard to get an idea of what to take seriously and change how we write a story," said one. Another suggested a simple feedback system: "Maybe every two or three weeks or whatever, look over the critiques for that period (and) say, 'Quit doing this, or keep it up,' or whatever." However, the top editors did not adopt formal or regular feedback.

Do the two top editors, who ordered the critique program, think it has improved the newspaper? They did not set up a system to gauge improvement, and they could not provide evidence of improvement. "I honestly don't know that. It's hard to quantify," Whittum said. Lightfoot said she had no proof of improvement, and she was not concerned that she lacked such proof. She said, at the least, that she had seen a noticeable change in the culture of her newsroom because of the critiques:

"I don't think I can quantify it. But I think it has made people think. . . . I think people, despite their criticism, take it seriously. It has caused comments – if people disagree with something in the critiques, they'll talk about it with others. In the course of doing that, they're thinking about the story. . . . It gets people involved."

Lightfoot said the critique program, despite its problems, was still the best alternative. "I can't hire a writing coach," she said. "If I do something, this is it."

### **Feedback, Defensiveness and Willingness to Change**

Lightfoot and Whittum did not dispute the criticism from staffers that they should provide more feedback on the comments in the critiques. They also were impressed with

the strong support for some system to root out frequently cited problems. They disagreed on whether the critique system uncovered some cracks in news people's traditional wall of resistance to criticism.

"I started to make a list of things that were most commonly cited. . . . I thought you could begin to fix those things and gradually eradicate them," Whittum said. But the compilation proved to be too much effort. The lack of any system to fix problems "is a real good point," he said. Lightfoot also considered making regular comments about the critiques, but time constraints blocked her from doing this on a regular basis. Lightfoot said she did respond to direct questions from critics.

Lightfoot was impressed with the staff's support for some system to fix problems. She said that support showed that staffers "are thinking about managing the problem" even though most are not managers. She said she should take advantage of that willingness to change: "This tells me I need to think about what to do in the way of follow-up." She said any such system should include individual contact between editors and subordinates whose work attracts many negative comments.

Whittum agreed with the literature and the survey results that seemed to show a high degree of defensiveness among Advocate news people. Lightfoot also expressed no surprise at data showing the critiques produced defensiveness and might have eroded morale. "I think people here have not been used to feedback. We've never evaluated performance in a formal way. So this is new to some people. . . . It was difficult for people to adjust to." However, Lightfoot was upbeat. She noted that some survey responses suggested a willingness to change, and she questioned the theory that news people hate criticism. "It could be that not everybody is so resistant to criticism. It could be that some people really wanted feedback they haven't gotten before," she said.

Lightfoot and Whittum's concern about defensiveness was reflected in a February 7, 2001, memo. The memo, written by Whittum, was a response to complaints and concerns from offended staffers. The memo read:

Staff:

I have been asked to clarify the "philosophy" behind the critiques and what Linda and I expect them to achieve. The critiques are basically intended to be a peer review of our work. At the same time, we think the comments may reflect the reactions of other readers. In many cases, the person offering the critique is simply giving his or her opinion. This should be taken for what it is -- the opinion of a reader. We should remember that these are the opinions of intelligent people and therefore should not be summarily dismissed. There have been, and I'm sure will continue to be, comments with which Linda or I do not agree. This is not a bad thing. Opinions vary. Reporters, photographers, etc., should be reminded that their work may be perceived in a different manner than they intended. Mistakes in style, grammar, syntax, etc., are pointed out in the hope that we can reduce the number of such errors. If there is a "spirit" of the critiques, it is that they are a sincere effort on the part of the entire news staff to raise the quality of our writing, editing, photography, graphics and design.

### **Other Assessments**

Lightfoot was not disturbed by the fact that only about a quarter of the critique comments were about mechanical problems, such as spelling and grammar. However, she disputed survey findings in which her staff suggested the critiques focus more on "big-picture" issues. Staffers often considered that noting mechanical errors was just being picky, but such sloppiness affected the newspaper's credibility with many readers. She said, "I don't want to lose sight of why we started this -- Readers noting grammatical errors."

The executive editor said she saw great value in critics commenting on work by sections outside their own, on types of stories they did not write about, and on technical issues that were not part of their job. When they made those comments, they acted much like regular readers, who did not care about the process but only saw the product. For instance, Lightfoot was impressed that some comments questioned how editors displayed

stories or other information in the newspaper. “I like when reporters second-guess the way we’ve played a story. I think that’s almost like talking like a reader,” she said. However, Lightfoot also saw one unforeseen professional byproduct of the critique program – it uncovered editing talent. Most Advocate editors are promoted from within, she said, and critiquing “was a real editing-type exercise.”

Lightfoot also expressed approval that clarity, a non-mechanical issue, received so many comments in the critiques. “From the get-go we said we wanted to focus on clarity,” she said. She expressed disfavor with using the critiques to reward or punish staffers who receive praise or criticism, noting that such a system would put pressure on critics and probably encourage them to tone down criticism. Besides, she said, “The notion is not to punish people. The notion is how we are going to improve our work.”

### **Summary of the Findings**

The first year of The Advocate critique program was a modest success with its staffers, who had much criticism of the program but generally said it did some good and offered them some personal benefit. The critique reports occasionally offered staffers specific suggestions on how to continue good practices. The critiques offered somewhat more help on how to avoid perceived flaws on the news pages. The program also had significant support from, if only minimal participation by, the senior management in the newsroom.

Those findings do not seem to add up to glowing praise for the program, but they do amount to an endorsement. Specifically, this case study produced several conclusions that, on balance, produced a positive review for the program:

1. After a year of critiquing, staffers had a lot of complaints about the program. But they said it worked at least modestly well. Most thought their own work had improved “a

little” because of the critiques. Most read the critiques regularly and wanted to keep reading and writing them -- but they wanted some changes.

2. Most staffers thought compliance with the newspaper’s style had improved, and many saw improvement in two other mechanical areas -- spelling and typographical errors. In every other case, large majorities saw no change at all.

3. Older journalists and staffers with more than 10 years at the newspaper saw somewhat more value in the program than younger and less senior employees.

4. Topping the staffers’ list of complaints about the program was the minimal role and lack of feedback from the top two editors and the defensiveness and lower morale they said the program caused in the newsroom. However, respondents showed little support for giving up any of their own critiquing power to the editors, and some comments suggested the improvements were worth putting up with some hard feelings.

5. The analysis of a large sample of the critique reports written by the staffers showed a nearly 50-50 mix of positive to negative comments -- with positive comments increasing during the study period. Over half the comments were about substantial writing issues such as conciseness and completeness. A quarter of the comments involved pesky mechanical errors that plagued the newspaper. One in six comments simply declared an item “good,” offering not even a general reason why it was good.

6. Three in ten of the negative comments provided suggestions on how to revise the work that the comment criticized. Only about one in seven positive comments provided enough information to help staffers repeat the good work cited.

7. The top two editors expressed satisfaction, even gratification, that a majority of their staffers (1) gave modest support to the critique program, (2) thought it worked and (3) wanted to keep and even strengthen it.

8. The top editors agreed that they could have taken a stronger role in the critiques and accepted that the critiques caused some hard feelings, which they said seemed inevitable.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Significance of the Study

The most significant contribution of The Advocate program might be its limited success in overcoming journalists' strong resistance to criticism -- a resistance well documented in the literature. Advocate staffers seemed interested in the program, as evidenced by their responses to some of the survey questions, the thoroughness of some critique reports and the executive editor's anecdotal evidence that staffers frequently got in lively discussions about the critiques. Other survey responses suggested that, despite their gripes and defensiveness, a majority of the respondents appreciated the critiques, took them seriously and opposed losing any of their power to instruct the rest of the staff.

This study also offers editors at other newspapers a more detailed, organized and objective look at this program than they would be liable to get from talking to editors at The Advocate or by relying on anecdotal evidences alone. The program also offers strapped news budgets an inexpensive alternative to other improvement programs.

The study shows that some rank-and-file staffers were willing to devote a great deal of time and thought to journalism standards and how The Advocate lived up to those standards. The study shows improvement does not have to be top-down only. Instead, editors might harness their staffers' energy and expertise to improve news products.

The Advocate program was a rarity. Its format was unique, as best as the researcher could determine from a review of the literature and checks with hundred of members of journalism listservs. It was a sustained self-improvement effort. It was not costly. It focused not just on fixing errors but also on encouraging good work. That is a crucial

factor for success, according to peer-review experts. By allowing discussion of big-picture issues as well as mechanics, it promoted not just adherence to rules but also discussion of the kind of good journalism advocated by newspaper think tanks. The program also offered rank-and-file staffers a high-profile, almost managerial, role in the newspaper. All of that deserves study to see if such a program is worth repeating elsewhere.

### **The Advocate's Special Circumstances**

There might not be any typical newspaper in the U.S. But The Advocate might be less typical than many others, and that could limit the usefulness of these findings to other newspaper organizations. First, during the study period The Advocate was a family-owned newspaper in an industry increasingly dominated by chain-owned newspapers. Its work culture, its workers' attitude and other factors could have been different as a result. For instance, The Advocate has never had a real employee evaluation system. The Advocate's public peer-review system might work differently at papers with a tradition of one-on-one evaluations by supervisors. In a related concern, The Advocate had a large number of older and longtime employees (well over half the respondents were over 40 at the time and half had worked at the paper more than 10 years). Perhaps older and longtime workers are more receptive to change; the survey mildly suggests that they might be. Or perhaps older workers are harder to change, especially if so many of them have not been subject to evaluations in the past. Finally, The Advocate, like any organization, had its own special traits. It was a medium-size newspaper with about a 93,000 daily circulation. It had about 130 newsroom employees. Its pay and work conditions allowed it to attract mostly only Louisiana natives and journalists from smaller newspapers in Louisiana. Newspapers with a broader mix of employees, with better pay

scales to attract more desirable staff, or with more or fewer employees might experience different results with a staff-centered improvement program.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Seventy percent is a good response rate for a survey. Two similar newsroom-staff surveys reviewed for this study had response rates of 62 and 66 percent, which the authors considered high response rates (Coulson & Graziano, 1989). However, 30 percent of the staffers did not fill out the Web-based survey despite four invitations, an easy-to-use online form and a promise of anonymity from one of their long-time colleagues (the researcher is a middle-level editor at The Advocate). There was no way to know whether those staffers' views might have been similar to the views of those who did respond. Some staffers might not have responded because of animosity or mistrust toward the researcher, who was well known to many of them. The researcher's position as a middle manager also might have prompted skepticism about the promised anonymity of the survey. Indeed, many of the staffers who did respond did not list demographic information the researcher might have used to identify them. Finally, the survey had a lot to do with staffers' attitudes, and it is possible that the act of not responding indicated attitudes generally different from staffers who were willing to express their views. However, those who did not respond also might have given the critiques little thought or cared little about the issues the survey raised. In those cases, their views might have meant little to this study.

The survey also contained a significant omission. Through an oversight, the survey did not ask the staff whether grammar, a major component of mechanics, had improved because of the critiques. However, the survey did address related mechanical issues such

as punctuation and spelling, and it is doubtful that adding one more element would have greatly changed the results. Grammar comments were analyzed in the content analysis.

Finally, The content analysis, although it coded a large sample of the critique comments, had a number of limitations. The first was the general difficulty of quantifying opinions. Next was the difficulty of pigeonholing comments that were all over the map. The critique program set few guidelines for comments, and the comments were not always clear or consistently expressed by the critics. A pilot analysis produced a list of 27 items that was too long for detailed analysis. Actually, the list totaled about 40 because many categories, such as conciseness, allowed for both positive and negative comments. For instance, “very concise” and “very wordy” were different types of comments. Also, some comments seemed more significant and well thought out than others, but an offhand comment carried the same weight as a thoughtful one. Finally, the low coder reliability in the categories of “depth” -- 86 percent reliability for negative comments and 72 percent for positive comments -- questions the value of those otherwise interesting results.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

A second look at The Advocate program, perhaps after one more year of operation, could be enlightening. Newspapers rarely sustain intense improvement programs over a long period. If this program continued, measuring its success could be more exact and thus more valuable in the future.

The literature also suggested that newspapers have tried a lot of improvement programs but that very few of them got a close look by academics. Many of those programs were less intense, less formal or of shorter duration than The Advocate program. But, if better newspapers are a worthy goal, aren't better-newspaper programs worth serious study? Fashioning a study of an improvement program is difficult, but this

study shows it is possible. Researchers could look to the newspapers in their college towns for worthy improvement programs or practices to study.

Researchers also could help newspaper editors fashion improvement programs. Academic involvement from the beginning could help ensure that an improvement program is significant and is subject to academic study. That would help editors determine whether their programs worked and how to make them better. The results of several such studies could form a useful list of which self-improvement practices to consider and which to avoid.

Early academic involvement could especially improve the content analysis portion of a self-improvement study. And whether or not they are involved in defining a program, future researchers should examine the content analysis methods in this study in hopes of making them less subjective and more systematic. Also, the survey seemed productive, but future surveys should match more closely the elements of the content analysis.

Finally, other researchers should consider studying a chain newspaper or comparing improvement programs at two or more newspapers. Such studies might produce results that could apply to other newspaper with greater confidence than the results of this study.

### **Suggestions for Future Critiques**

This study also sought to help other newspaper editors weigh the potential for such a program at their organization. So here is some advice to those editors:

Make the program as easy as possible for staff members. For instance, don't require staffers to conduct laborious, phrase-by-phrase critiques of many pages. Don't make each staffer do critiques too often. And make the critique reports easy to handle. E-mail distribution works well; it is easy to write and read, quick and easy to distribute, easy to save for later perusal and, unlike printed memos, hard to lose except on purpose.

Provide fairly specific guidelines. Some of the frustration of The Advocate program was due to its lack of focus and the freedom of each staffer to make comments as he or she saw fit. Guidelines on what to comment on and how to make comments could provide a more consistent critique product.

Provide some real training. As the managing editor observed, some staffers were much better than others at the art of criticism. A group training session, perhaps by a writing coach or an academic with expertise in peer review, could help everyone but would especially help close the gap between staffers who do and don't possess critical writing and thinking skills. Staffers should be told what they must do and what the management will do too.

Consider a tighter focus. A newspaper might publish a couple of hundred thousand words in one issue. No one should pretend that a rotating panel of staffers, each working some critique time into their regular schedule, can carefully examine a week's worth of newspapers and write detailed reports on everything that is right or wrong with them. Editors might consider focusing on one or more specific weaknesses the editor has noticed or that readers have complained about.

Make it mandatory, to a point. Even with everyone involved, the critiques breed resentment. Let all the lazy or overworked or uninterested or stationed-elsewhere staffers out of the mix and resentment will grow. In addition, there is some evidence that actually doing the critiques makes journalists more aware of the newspaper operation, more appreciative of that operation and more aware of their own work. However, the management might let off the hook staffers who go to the editors to express strong objections against participating, especially if the number is small. It is possible those

conscientious objectors would blossom as critics if they had no choice, but more probably they would do a poor job. And just a few missing voices will not hurt the overall product.

Require positive comments. A healthy mix of positive and negative comments might have saved The Advocate program from turning into another failed gripe sheet. The Advocate experience suggests staffers can rail against all their pet peeves and still find good things in the newspaper to urge others to emulate.

Encourage solutions for the cited problems and encourage sufficient explanation to duplicate praised work. Griping or praising is easier than fixing or analyzing, but the latter practices are more helpful. The Advocate experience suggests that, with a little prodding, many staffers will offer ways to fix the problems they find. More difficult is getting staffers to explain their positive comments well enough that their peers can use the comments to improve their own work.

Give the management a strong, clear role. The top editors, who impose such policies on staffers, should assume a significant and high-profile portion of the work. Top editors should promise to provide regular responses – perhaps once a week. They could respond to specific critique comments, to issues that come up often or on problems that continue despite repeated criticism.

Wait it out. The Advocate program suggests that staffers, when first empowered to broadcast their views to the entire staff, go after problems they have noticed for some time but felt powerless to correct. Later, they learn to appreciate what's good in the paper. By the end of the first year, The Advocate's positive comments were far outnumbering negative comments.

Despite some pitfalls, peer review in a newsroom offers some potential benefits that could be worth the trouble and the risk. The benefits, at the least, include staffers thinking

and talking about quality. Even griping about the critiques often amounts to a serious discussion about what constitutes good and bad journalism. Forcing staffers to occasionally read the paper closely makes them more familiar with the product. Writing critiques allows them to practice critical thinking and informative writing. Being on the receiving end of critiques is the only feedback some staffers might get. Being on the front end of the critiques gives everyone a voice in the paper beyond their niche. Advocate staffers, despite their gripes about the program, seemed to enjoy their power to make everyone else listen to what they think. The read-it-like-a-subscriber mentality of the program also offers promise of serving readers better, although staffers are not truly “typical” readers.

Finally, in spite of their criticism about the process, a majority of The Advocate staff thought the program improved them and their newspaper. That is the best reason to consider an Advocate-style critique program – it probably can’t hurt, and it just might help produce better newspapers and better newspaper professionals. Quality must be a major weapon in print journalism’s competition against more glitzy, more timely and more convenient sources of information.

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## APPENDIX A

### INSTRUCTIONS TO CRITIQUE COMMITTEE MEMBERS: MASTER MEMO, GUIDELINES AND SCHEDULE

#### Dear Critiquers:

Here are your section assignments for the week of Saturday, ????? to Friday, ?????. ????? will be the "assembler" of the four critiques. Please get your critiques to him??? in a timely fashion so he can string them together and send me a day's critiques at a time.

The new and revised "tips" are below.

Everyone gets an extra section to critique one day during their week.

Also, we have been getting a lot of comments about the newsworthiness of the stories on a page. That's okay. But we can't control breaking news. What we want are critiques of the individual stories - what was good about them; what, if anything, is unclear or missing.

Linda and I thank you for your service.

The daily section assignments will be:

**SATURDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People section-  
Sports section-  
Religion-

**SUNDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People-  
Sports section-  
Magazine-

**MONDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People section-  
Sports section-

**TUESDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-

Business/People section-  
Sports section-

**WEDNESDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People section-  
Sports section-

**THURSDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People section-  
Sports section-  
FOOD-

**FRIDAY**  
A section-  
Metro/Acadiana section-  
Business/People section-  
Sports section-  
FUN-

### **New & Improved Critiques Tips**

1. Be as specific as possible and repeat enough of headline, story, etc. that reader of the critique can determine what is being critiqued without having to get a paper.
2. Cite (in order) Advocate Stylebook, AP Stylebook, New World Dictionary (College Edition) when possible in pointing out style and spelling errors.. Feel free to also cite from Harbrace College Handbook, The Elements of Style, Words Into Type, etc. Make sure style, grammar, spelling, etc. error is what you think it is.
3. List by section (A Section, Metro/Acadiana, Sports, People, Business, etc.).
4. Be constructive in criticism. However, don't just say Joe Blow's story on X was no good. Say why it was no good.
5. Point out those stories, photos, design, etc. that excel as well as those that don't. However, don't just say Joe Blow's story on X was great. Say why it was great.
6. Keep current on critiques. (Saturday and Sunday's critiques to me by Monday evening, Monday's critiques to me by Tuesday evening, etc.)
7. Encourage and include any observations from co-workers
8. Overtime is authorized if necessary.
9. Critique local copy only.
10. Do NOT spend more than 1 hour a day doing your critique.

Call me or email me if you have any questions.

**jbw**

## APPENDIX B

### SAMPLE DAILY CRITIQUE REPORT

#### Critiques for Saturday, December 2

##### A section

2A - Headline "L.A. passenger shot by police to lose eye" is weak because "passenger" is not a good word choice, plus quasi-passive voice. Perhaps "L.A. woman may lose eye after police shooting" or "Woman may lose eye after L.A. police shooting" Also, the story does not say the woman is from L.A., although it's a reasonable assumption.

8A - Kevin Blanchard did two good jobs in his story on the GOP protesters in Lafayette. First, he found good subjects to quote - people who were not previously activists (or so they say) but turned out for this. Second, he noted the law-enforcement bias in their casual handling of the Republicans but their intense surveillance of Palestinian students who protested recently.

12A - Some police briefs have wordy leads that back into the story and use passive voice. Examples:

"A video store clerk who did not react quickly enough to a robber's first demand for money got robbed at gunpoint Thursday night, police said."

OR: A robber pulled a gun on a video-store clerk who did not react quickly enough to the bandit's first, unarmed demand for money Thursday night, police said.

Also, "A man tried to rob a Florida Boulevard discount store Thursday but was scared away by a customer, city police said."

OR: A customer scared off a robber Thursday night at a Florida Boulevard discount store, city police said.

This lead also puts the place before the date, which is backward from the local stylebook, pages 52-53 - time element entry 13A - Good headline: "Farmers not chicken about gators"

##### B section

Lafayette deseg article, 1B:

Paragraph 2 has awkward wording: "Haik issued an order Friday morning lifting his gag 'in its totality.'" Should it be gag order? Or, the lede already explained that the order was lifted, and the "in totality" part can be mentioned further down in the story.

Paragraph 4 said sites were identified only as A, C and D. This should say previously identified only as A, C, and D, since the article goes on to identify them. Also later in the story the judge states he will only approve a school on the north side of Lafayette. Which of these sites fall into these criteria? That should be higher in the story.

##### Saturday special, 1B:

Good story, nice to see positive feature from schools. Photos, however, don't match story very well. It would have been better to have at least one photo from the Japanese class mentioned in the article.

**Nutcracker story, 1B:**

Loved the ending, where girl states she thinks it's fun because she gets to put both her hands on her face and wiggle her fingers in imitation of mouse whiskers. Would have also made great lede.

**CASA fundraiser, 3B:**

Wow. Good information about there being a SPCA before there was child protection laws or groups. Story dragged, however, and could have been told in less space.

**Sports**

In Sam King's column, "Spurrier's Gators still pride of SEC" on 1-D. Based on past performances, he's knows more than just a little about "what's going on."

There should not be an apostrophe-s on the word "he."

In Sheldon Mickles' story, "Paying huge dividends" on page 2-D. One of Oldham's best games as a Saints came last Sunday against the Rams. Covering All-Pro running back Marshall Faulk on most third-down plays, he helped limit Faulk to 43 total yards in the shocking victory.

"Saints" should be singular.

In the story "Lady Cajuns win to capture berth in championship" on page 8-D.

Tjhe Cajuns will meet the winner of Friday's late North Carolina A&T-Stony Brook matchup for the tournament title at 3 p.m. (CST) today. "Tje" should be The.

**F Section, Religion**

After reading "Sharing Redemption - former drug user offers free programs to help substance abusers," I was left wanting to know more about this former drug user, Tonja Myles. Story needed more details about her past troubles and how she got out of it instead of just, "The next day, Myles said she was delivered from drugs."

## APPENDIX C

### CODING SHEET FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

**Unit number:** month-date-unit number: 42204 for the fourth unit on April 22

**Date of publication:** month/day/year, such as 03-14-01 for March 14, 2001

**Month:** 1-12      **Day of Week:** Sunday=1, Monday=2, etc.

**Type** 1. Copy 2. Photo 3. Headline 4. Graphics 5. Layout  
6. Page or package 7. Section.

**Positive/negative:** 1. Positive 2. Negative 4. Unclear

**Comment type:**

0. All comments in positive/negative category No. 4
  1. Good; too vague to fit a more definite category
  2. Objectivity/fairness/balance
  3. Typo; unintended errors; includes words left out, extra words left in
  4. Spelling; when it appears to be intentional (not a typo)
  5. Grammar (except punctuation)
  6. Punctuation
  7. Style
  8. Redundancy; extra words or information not needed
  9. Jargon
  10. Active/passive voice; sometimes really means liveliness
  11. Organization; includes transitions, info that should be higher, lower
  12. Accuracy; accurate or not accurate
  13. Clarity, good or bad; including word choice
  14. Conciseness; concise or wordy (used more words than necessary)
  15. Completeness; lots of info; lack sufficient info
  16. Mood, tone; right or wrong
  17. Relevance to reader; it is relevant or it is not
  18. Informative, useful (or not)
  19. Emphasis; right or wrong; includes how the story is played
  20. Dead number – no data
  21. Diversity (topic, race, geography)
  22. Voices; right ones, not usual ones, many of them
  23. Validity of sources; valid or not valid
  24. Liveliness; lively (including “clever”) or dull
  25. Examples, anecdotes (lots of, or lack of)
  26. Technical – spacing, layout glitches, print quality, etc.
  27. Other (specific comment that does not fit any of the types)

**Depth/Negative:** 1. Detection only 2. Detection/revision obvious  
3. Diagnosis 4. Revision

**Depth/Positive:** 1. Detection only 2. Diagnosis/general 3. Diagnosis specific

## APPENDIX D

### SAMPLE OF EXCEL SPREADSHEET FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

Case	Date	Month	Day	Type	Comment	Posneg	Depthneg	Depthpos
70601	7/6/2000	7	5	1	18	1		2
70602	7/6/2000	7	5	1	15	1		2
70603	7/6/2000	7	5	1	13	1		2
70604	7/6/2000	7	5	1	13	2	4	
70605	7/6/2000	7	5	1	8	2	2	
70606	7/6/2000	7	5	1	1	1		1
70607	7/6/2000	7	5	1	22	2	4	
70608	7/6/2000	7	5	3	13	2	3	
70609	7/6/2000	7	5	2	15	1		2
70610	7/6/2000	7	5	1	26	2	2	
70611	7/6/2000	7	5	1	12	2	2	
70612	7/6/2000	7	5	1	3	2	2	
70613	7/6/2000	7	5	1	0	2	0	
70614	7/6/2000	7	5	2	0	0	0	
70615	7/6/2000	7	5	3	7	2	2	
70801	7/8/2000	7	7	7	15	2	3	
70802	7/8/2000	7	7	1	15	1		2
70803	7/8/2000	7	7	3	24	1		1
70804	7/8/2000	7	7	2	24	1		1
70805	7/8/2000	7	7	2	24	2	2	
70806	7/8/2000	7	7	1	7	2	2	
70807	7/8/2000	7	7	4	7	2	2	
70808	7/8/2000	7	7	1	7	2	2	
70809	7/8/2000	7	7	1	7	2	2	
70810	7/8/2000	7	7	1	7	2	2	
70811	7/8/2000	7	7	4	26	2	2	
70812	7/8/2000	7	7	6	1	1		1
70813	7/8/2000	7	7	1	15	1		3
70814	7/8/2000	7	7	1	15	1		3
70815	7/8/2000	7	7	1	5	2	2	
70816	7/8/2000	7	7	1	7	2	2	
70817	7/8/2000	7	7	3	12	2	2	
70818	7/8/2000	7	7	1	18	1		2
70819	7/8/2000	7	7	1	13	2	4	

## APPENDIX E

### EXAMPLES OF SURVEY RESULTS

Generally	4	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	4	4	2	3	3	2
Heads	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	3	3	3	3
Layouts	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	3	3	3	3
Style	3	3	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	3	1	3	3
Spelling	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	1	3
Typos	3	3	1	3	3	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3
Voices	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	1	3
Completeness	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	3	3	1	3
Clarity	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	1	1	3	3	1	3
Cutlines	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	3	3	3
Diversity	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	3	3	3	3
Regular people	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		3	1	1	3	3	3	3
Minorities	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	1	3	3	3	3	3
Editors/subs	1	3	2	2	2	3	3	1	2	1	3	3	3	3	3
Enthusiasm	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	3	3	2	3
Among desks	2	3	2	3	3	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	3	2	3
Cares	3	2	2	3	3	3	1	3	1	5	4	3	3	3	1
Toes	3	3	1	2	2	4	1	1	2	5	4	2	3	3	1
Own work	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	1	3	5	3	5	1	4
Read time	5	3	4	3	3	4	5	2	4	5	2	2	5	2	4
Write time	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	2	5	4	2	5
Boost morale	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	2	1
Like notice	4	3	4	3	3	5	2	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	3
Staffers' voice	3	2	1	1	1	4	3	2	1	5	5	2	3	4	1
Need criticism	4	4	5	4	4	4	2	2	3	5	5	4	5	5	5
Defensive	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	1	4	3	4	4	4	4	4
Need feedback	5	5	4	2	2	5	4	1	4	3	4	5	5	5	1
Just opinion	4	5	5	4	4	3	4	3	4	5	2	4	4	4	5
Sub for editors	3	5	4	4	4	2	5	2	5	3	2	2	5	5	5
More positives	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	2	4	5	4	4	5	3	5
Good use of time	2	1	2	1	1	4	1	4	1	3	4	1	3	4	1
Make me careful	3	1	2	3	3	4	1	1	2	1	4	1	3	4	1
Misunderstood	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	1	3	5	4	2	4	3	3
Understandable	4	3	5	3	3	4	2	4	3	5	4	4	4	3	3
Read how often	3	3	3	4	4	4	2	3	5	2	5	4	4	5	3

**APPENDIX F**  
**SURVEY FORM**

**Generally, do you think the critiques have improved the news coverage:**

- A lot       Some       A little       Not at all  
 Made them worse

---

**How do you think the critiques have affected the following items?**

- | Made better              | Made worse               | Noticed no change        |                                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Quality of headlines               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Quality of layouts                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Compliance with style              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Spelling                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Typos                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Getting multiple voices in stories |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Completeness of stories            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Clarity of writing                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Liveliness of writing              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Quality of cutlines and taglines   |

- |                          |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Diversity of stories topics (less "same old stuff") |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | More "regular people" in stories                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Minority voices in stories                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Editors' relationships with subordinates            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Enthusiasm in the newsroom                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Relations among news desks                          |
- 

**On a scale of 5 to 1, how much do you agree or disagree with these statements?**

- |                      |                   |         |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------|
| Strongly agree ..... | Strongly disagree |         |
| 5 .....              | 4 .....           | 3 ..... |
|                      | 2 .....           | 1       |
- 
- |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | The critiques show my newspaper cares about quality. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques keep people on their toes.                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I usually just read critiques about my own work      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques take too much time to read.                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | They take too much time to write.                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques boost morale.                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | I like to see my work noticed.                       |

- |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques give staffers a voice in the newspaper.             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | We all need criticism to get better.                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques make people defensive.                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | The critiques need more feedback from editors.                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques are just someone's opinion.                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiques are a poor substitute for editors doing their jobs. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | My work usually gets more positive than negative comments.    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critiquing is a good use of staffers' time.                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | The critiques make me more careful about my work.             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critics often don't understand my work.                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Critique reports usually are easy to understand.              |

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**How well do you *read* the critiques?**

- Not at all
- Skim them occasionally
- Read them sometimes

- Read them often
- Read all, or almost all, of the comments

Why?

---

**Do you think the critiques *cause* some problems? Check all that apply:**

- Less creativity for fear of being criticized
  - Defensiveness among staffers
  - More tension in the newsroom
  - Unnecessary embarrassment
  - Critiquers pick on people they don't like personally
  - Other
- 

**If you were in charge, would you continue the program?**

- Yes
- No

**Why or why not?**

---

**How would you improve the critiques? Check *all* that apply:**

- Focus more on details (grammar, typos, accuracy, misspelling, style, etc.)
- Focus more on the big picture (story play, bias, effectiveness of layouts, etc.)
- Do critiques less often (not every day)

- Focus on specific issues instead of the entire news product
- Get more feedback from top editors
- Have editors, not everybody, do the critiques
- Set up a system to root out frequently cited problems
- Identify the people who write the critiques
- Don't mention reporters' names in the critiques
- Have editors delete off-base comments before distributing critiques
- Have editors say if they agree or disagree with critiquers' comments
- Require critics to suggest solutions or alternatives
- Ask some subscribers to critique the newspaper
- Don't keep repeating the same criticisms over and over
- Use critiques to reward good work
- Use critiques to penalize bad work

Other

Other

**Have the critiques improved *your own* work?**

- Yes, a lot       Yes, a little       No, not at all

**If yes, how? If no, why not?**

**Have the critiques *hurt* your work in any way?**

No       Yes; how?

**How many times have you served on an Advocate critique committee?**

5 or more    4    3    2    1    None

**You are a:**    Writer    Copy editor    Graphic artist  
 Supervising editor    Other

**Your highest degree earned**  (If no college degree, skip next question)

**Your major in college:**    Journalism    English  
 Other:

**Your age:**

**How much time did you spend during your last week on a critique committee?**

About  hours total

**You have worked for The Advocate**  years.  
(Type a whole number. If less than 1 year, put 0)

**COMMENTS**

## VITA

John M. LaPlante Jr. is a career print journalist living in the Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He has worked for several newspapers in south Louisiana. During his 21 years at The Advocate, the subject of this study, he has held positions that included state-government reporter, higher education reporter, assistant city editor, editorial writer and, at the time of this study, editor of one of the larger state-capitol news bureaus in the U.S.

He is a native of New Orleans, one of 10 children of John Sr. and Ann LaPlante of Mandeville, Louisiana. He is a graduate of Mandeville High School and earned his bachelor of arts degree in journalism from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1975. He is married to the former Merrill Laney LaPlante, and they have two children.

He has worked on several improvement activities in his field, including participation in the formation of the critique program that is the subject of this study and as a board member of the Press Club of Baton Rouge and the (national) Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors. He has taught advanced news reporting and introductory media writing courses at Louisiana State University.