

## **The Campus Paper in a Digital World: A Profile of the Daily Tar Heel**

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It's a beautiful, sunny afternoon in Chapel Hill – the first after many days of rain – but inside the Daily Tar Heel's office, the newsroom was busy with staff scurrying around, preparing for the front-page editorial that would run the next morning.

That editorial, a scathing criticism of the UNC administration's actions over the past year, would perfectly encapsulate many of the issues facing the campus newspaper, which has recently been struggling to find its footing in a shifting media landscape. Once highly respected and very profitable, the DTH has more recently lost some of its luster and run into financial trouble.

Still, the newspaper seeks to speak truth to the University's powerful, which was the primary motivation behind that editorial. Jane Wester, the paper's editor-in-chief for the 2016-2017 school year, said the unusual decision to print it on the front-page wasn't taken lightly.

"Obviously that's a huge deal," she said. "That's not something anyone should do lightly. My fear with is that I don't want to set a precedent that we do that all the time, but I wrote a column saying it's a signal of distress, because we think that for this community to continue in the way that we want it to it has to make a change."

Opinion Editor Tyler Fleming says that the piece, which focused around complaints that university administrators are prioritizing the school's reputation over student needs, was the culmination of many editorials the paper had published over the last four years.

"Basically everything we wrote we have made clear our opinion before," he said. "We've gotten frustrated, because every time we write something critical of UNC, it's dismissed, which makes us think this university is actually incapable of handling criticism of itself."

While Fleming said they haven't yet received an official response from the administration, the piece has received praise from student leaders. Harry Edwards, the former Student Body Treasurer, said the editorial was good, and the Daily Tar Heel might have the power to actually make a difference.

"The majority of professors and administrators I know – and even [the Board of] Trustees – read [the Daily Tar Heel] religiously," Edwards said. "They really genuinely can affect things."

Still, Edwards also expressed a wish for some of the paper's other editorials to come from a wider variety of political voices.

"They used to be a little more measured about the editorials," he said. "They've become very very liberal – which I don't think is a terribly bad thing – but it would be useful to have more perspectives coming from the campus paper. They're quite predictable."

Another former student government leader, who asked not to be quoted by name, said that the editorial board often contributes to the widespread polarization on campus and even makes conservative voices less likely to speak up.

These issues around political bias and depth of reporting are difficult, considering that the paper employs more than 200 student staff writers, most of whom start with no journalistic experience. The paper goes to great lengths to ensure the quality and objectivity of its reporting, but it's also not perfect.

Former DTH staff writer Blake Dodge, a junior who was assigned to the State and National desk during her first two years, says the organization sometimes has difficulty producing good writing on campus issues.

"I think I'm not the only person who's sometimes disappointed with the writers' understanding of what they are reporting on," she said. "My word for a lot of the content the Daily Tar Heel produces is 'facile'."

In a large university with hundreds of events every week, it can also be difficult for the paper to choose what to report on. Sophomore Cassandra Cassidy, who was editor of the "Swerve" arts and culture desk in the fall, said sometimes the choice of stories would reflect implicit assumptions made by the papers' staff.

"I think the intentions are there to report factually, and I think it's one of the best student-run papers for its criticism of the university," she said. "I just hope that the DTH gets to a point where it is reporting on everything on campus and it's not so isolated into what the editors think should be reported on."

This debate of what is and isn't newsworthy playing out in newsrooms across the nation, not just at UNC. In a digital world where reporting isn't constrained by the print space of a physical paper, the DTH now has the ability to feature more stories that wouldn't fit before.

This year the Daily Tar Heel took its first step towards separating digital and print content, choosing to not publish a print edition on Tuesday and instead only publish articles online. Editor-in-Chief Jane Wester said the move felt like a big deal, but didn't hurt the paper too much.

"It honestly did not affect stuff as much as we thought it would," Wester said. "The majority of our readers had already been online before we switched, so we haven't noticed a huge difference."

This change was partially motivated by the paper's financial struggles, which offer a picture of the difficulty facing smaller, community newspapers in the age of digital media.

IRS filings for DTH Media, Inc., the Daily Tar Heel's parent group, show a paper that is perilously close to bankruptcy. In Form 990, which is required for non-profit groups, the organization reported an annual loss ranging from \$70,000 to \$230,000 between the 2011 and 2015 school years, the most recent available.

The organization also reported nearly \$1 million in assets in summer 2015, \$660,000 of which were in cash and publicly traded securities. According to an August 2016 article written by Betsy O'Donovan, the paper's full-time general manager, the paper had just over \$400,000 in liquid assets in summer 2016, which suggests a \$260,000 loss in the 2015-2016 school year.

According to the filing, much of this loss is due to lower ad revenue, which fell by 10% in the 2014-2015 year, from \$1.19 million to \$1.07 million. That same filing also notes that the paper had a distribution of 15,000 copies and 9,000 unique web visitors each day.

O'Donovan says that when she started at the DTH last August, one of her primary goals was to develop new revenue streams that the paper could use to help subsidize the newsroom. This year, she helped pilot the paper's new 1893 Brand Studio, which brings the Daily Tar Heel's talent in branding, writing, photography, and videography to businesses and other community groups.

O'Donovan said this year has mostly been a learning experience, as the group has struggled to find its footing in the market.

"The brand studio didn't make as much money as I would've wanted this year," she said. "Part of that is the market that we're in, and part of it is that our initial idea was to be a low-cost, high-volume business, which is difficult."

Next school year, O'Donovan says the Daily Tar Heel will continue to develop new services for area businesses. One idea being discussed is a series of BuzzFeed-style videos about the food at local restaurants for their annual "Food Finder" guide, which will be sponsored by restaurant owners and other businesses in the Chapel Hill area.

The DTH is also pursuing a handful of sponsored events for the student body to interact with the newspaper and businesses. With each of these new opportunities, the Daily Tar Heel is simply pioneering new formats of their old business model— helping bridge the gap between off-campus businesses and UNC students.

Still, O'Donovan says she thinks that these will happen alongside the further decline of print, which could include cutting another weekday edition.

"The challenge for all of us is to manage the costs and our creative revenue development, in parallel with the decline of print," she said. "At some point, print will be a luxury product, because the overhead is so expensive, and because there's cheaper ways to distribute. I also don't think a daily news product is necessarily where a college campus' attention will be."

As she finishes her term as editor-in-chief, Wester says she trusts the paper will continue its long tradition of excellence, even it's in a different format.

“There’s this intense sense of responsibility for what the DTH is and what we are to the community,” she said. “Being the paper of record is not a small thing, and there’s this whole long history of everything the DTH has stood up for and covered well, and we’ll keep doing that.”