NC FAMILY
POLICY COUNCIL

SPOTLIGHT

A Flagrant Case of Media Bias

A Case Study

written by:
NC Family Staff

This article appears in the Summer 2016 edition of *Family North Carolina* magazine, a publication of the North Carolina Family Policy Council.

For over a month, stories about House Bill 2 dominated The *News & Observer* in Raleigh. According to our analysis, the newspaper published 161 stories and nearly 94,000 words during the first 35 days after HB2 was passed into law on March 23, 2016. That's an average of more than 4 stories and 2,400 words per day! This amount of coverage for a single action by the NC General Assembly in itself is astonishing, but more astounding was the amount of bias we discovered.

To those of us who support the law, it appeared that most of the coverage in *The News & Observer (N&O)* portrayed the law as hateful, radical and unpopular. But was that simply our perception, or the truth? We decided to take a closer look. We examined all of the stories posted on the *N&O* website during that time period in an attempt to quantify whether this bias actually existed. When we looked at the results, we were amazed at the extent of the bias and the obvious lack of any attempt to portray both sides of this complex and emotional issue.

Our Findings

Our simple content analysis found that 79% of all *N&O* coverage during the first month following passage of HB2 illustrated a strong anti-HB2 sentiment. A meager 21% portrayed pro-HB2 sentiment.

But of course, fairness is not all about word count. So, we identified and searched for three key facts or clarifications that *N&O* reporters could have included to more fully explain why people support HB2. Out

of a total of 93,960 words, only 1.7% (1,613 words) were devoted to these important facts! *(Please see explanation in the sidebar on page 9.)*

This is more astounding when you consider that there is widespread support of HB2 in North Carolina, particularly regarding the bathroom provision. Since the passage of HB2, there have been seven reputable polls[1] released to the public. These all illustrated a North Carolina that is deeply divided on the issue. Of these seven polls:

- NONE show a majority of North Carolinians opposing HB2.
- Five out of the seven show that at least a strong percentage, if not an outright majority, approves of the bathroom and locker room provision in HB2.

These numbers clearly illustrate that North Carolina remains divided, with widespread opinions on both sides.

A Tale of Two Rallies

This slanted reporting was most clearly present on Monday, April 25. The General Assembly had just convened for the 2016 Short Session of the Legislature. That day featured two rallies: one in support of HB2 and one in opposition. HB2 supporters numbered in the 2,000-3,000 range as illustrated by aerial photography. Anti-HB2 protestors totaled fewer than 1,000. This was not fairly or accurately reported by the *N&O*. On the contrary, *N&O* stories promoted—even celebrated—the outcry to repeal HB2, featuring videos, pictures, and stories about the rally and related activity in opposition to HB2, with very little attempt to provide stories about pro-HB2 attendees or activities.

The *N&O* only had one story that featured the thousands of citizens from all across the state who came to Raleigh on a workday to show their support and thankfulness for the measure. The *N&O* headline read, "Hundreds rally near NC Legislative Building to support HB2." The picture that accompanied the story clearly shows thousands. Another story that day featured an extensive description of all the activities of those opposed to HB2 and included only one sentence about support, which said, "A rally earlier in the day on the opposite side of the building, on Halifax Mall, drew a large crowd of HB2 supporters." This pattern is repeated in most of the *N&O* coverage of HB2; it was quite common to have nothing or simply one line that mentioned supporters within a long, descriptive article on anti-HB2 activities.

A real low point on the *N&O*'s coverage of HB2 was the story, "Raleigh's Lake Boone Chicken blasts HB2," featuring a stuffed chicken that sits on a rock outside a home in Raleigh. This 400-word story, complete with two pictures, demonstrates the lengths to which the *N&O* staff went to

N&O Numbers

Amount of coverage given to anti-HB2 sentiment or reaction **79%**

Amount of coverage given to pro-HB2 sentiment or reaction **21%**

HB2

find new, creative ways to blast HB2. If only they had put a little bit of their creative juices to work to find and interview just a few of the reasonable and respectable people who support HB2.

On a related note, NC Family has been receiving quite a few requests from foreign journalists hoping to find and interview people who support HB2. "It's easy to find the ones who oppose it," we were recently told. We tell these reporters that the HB2 supporters are out there; the polls clearly show they are. However, they have been so vilified and mocked by the anti-HB2 forces and the media, that most have taken to quietly contacting their representatives and the governor, encouraging them to stay the course. The news media, as illustrated by this case study of the *N&O*, has been complicit in the silencing of people who hold a view that differs from their own.

Exploring Possible Motivations

If support/opposition is evenly divided on HB2, why has the *N&O* refused to report it that way? Let's explore a few possibilities.

- The *N&O* has morphed into a partisan political blog competing against independent journalists/bloggers in a crowded market. It has abandoned even the façade of being a trustworthy community newspaper, designed to educate citizens and serve as a platform to discuss tough issues.
- It values ratings and profit over the concern and interests of our local community. Despite what many people think, the *N&O* is not a locally owned newspaper and hasn't been since 1995. It is owned by the California-based McClatchy Company, which also owns The Charlotte Observer and 10 "community" newspapers in and around the Capital city, including Cary, Chapel Hill, Durham, Garner, and Clayton. As with all newspapers these days, times are tough. The *N&O* has reduced its professional staff by more than 50% over the past 8 years and recently sold its valuable downtown Raleigh property and moved operations to Garner.
- It's politically motivated. That the *N&O* "leans left" has been a common complaint by conservative lawmakers and citizens for years. This could simply be yet another example of the *N&O* advocating for a left-leaning agenda.
- The *N&O* is caught up in the rush of the national media to condemn HB2 and to advocate for a "powerless" minority. Ironically, they have instead sided with powerful multinational corporations and the influential entertainment industry. This is not the first time the *N&O* has jumped on the national media bandwagon and ignored their responsibility to thoroughly investigate both sides and bring a voice of reason. "They start to quiver with a thrill when something like this happens," said *New York Times* Public Editor Dan Okrent in reference to a similar situation with the Duke Lacrosse case in Durham ten years ago.
- They don't really understand the pro-HB2 perspective. Many of the writers might not know anyone who vocally supports HB2. They might

HB2 supporters are out there; the polls clearly show they are. However, they have been so vilified and mocked by the anti-HB2 forces, that most have taken to quietly contacting their representatives and the governor, encouraging them to stay the course. The news media, as illustrated by this case study of the *N&O*, has been complicit in the silencing of people who hold a view that differs from their own.

truly believe that segregating bathrooms based solely on biological sex is morally wrong. This would lead to the characterization of those who support HB2 as morally corrupt and ignorant people.

According to the polling results, unless North Carolina is made up of a majority of ignorant and hateful people, there are actually quite a few intelligent and compassionate people who support HB2. Those people deserve to have their voices and opinions presented. It is the job of our community journalists to find and present those stories—particularly if their point of view is being underrepresented. The *N&O* failed in their responsibility to fairly present both sides of this contentious issue, and our state's reputation is the poorer for it.

For a footnoted version of this article, please visit www.ncfamily.org.

Our Methods & Findings

We analyzed 161 articles listed under the heading "*N&O* Coverage of North Carolina's House Bill 2" on the *N&O* website from March 23, 2016, which is the date HB2 was passed into law, through Tuesday, April 26, which was the first news day after the 2016 North Carolina General Assembly Short Session convened. *

Our methods involved a simple word count. According to our analysis, these articles contained 93,960 words of which, 56,357 were used to present either positive or negative sentiment or reaction to HB2. Of those 56,357 words, 44,219 (or 79%) illustrated a negative opinion or reaction in regard to HB2 and 12,138 (or 21%) featured a positive representation. Words deemed "neutral" were disregarded in the counts and percentages for this comparison..

In addition, we searched all of these stories for three key facts that would have helped present HB2 in a more truthful light. For this analysis, we used the total 93,960 word count. These three facts are:

1. Statements indicating that North Carolina is among a majority of states (and the federal government) that do not include "sexual orientation" and/or "gender identity" as protected classes in employment and public accommodation laws. (438 words)

0.47 percent

2. Statements indicating that HB2 did not substantively change North Carolina's nondiscrimination policies, but instead clarified these policies and emphasized that local governments may not exceed the established statewide law. (652 words)

0.69 percent

3. Statements indicating that local governments and businesses may continue to establish internal employment policies regarding their own personnel, but that cities and counties may not impose employment or public accommodation policies on local businesses that exceed the state law. (523 words)

0.55 percent

Of the 93,960 words in the stories reviewed, only 1.71% (1,613 words) were devoted to illustrating these facts, which could have been used to paint a more even-handed picture.

* This link is no longer available on the *N&O* website. However, for those who might want to verify our analysis, we have copies in our files and will make those available upon request.

Endnotes

1. http://www.twcnews.com/nc/triangle-sandhills/politics/2016/04/4/exclusive-poll--majority-of-voters-approve-of-hb2--but-worry-it-hurts-state-business---image.html

http://www.wral.com/asset/news/state/nccapitol/2016/04/12/15637752/PollPrint.pdf

https://1ttd918ylvt17775r1u6ng1adc-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CivitasNCPollApril2016.pdf

http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2016/04/hb-2-deeply-unpopular-in-north-carolina-voters-think-its-hurting-state.html

https://www.nccivitas.org/2016/civitas-poll-shows-support-for-house-bill-2-remains-consistent/

http://www.elon.edu/e-web/elonpoll/041916.xhtml

http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2016/06/nc-governors-race-remains-tied-hb2-still-unpopular.html

North Carolina Family Policy Council
PO Box 20607
Raleigh, NC 27619

www.ncfamily.org