Old white fox: Frank Eyerly and the Des Moines Register and Tribune

Josh Pichler

The University of Montana

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Frank Eyerly directed the day-to-day operations of The Des Moines Register for 23 years, longer than any other person in that newspaper's history. During Eyerly's stint as the managing editor of both The Des Moines Register and The Des Moines Tribune (the papers were owned by the same family), his staff won dozens of awards for journalism, including eight Pulitzer Prizes.

Eyerly joined The Register's staff in 1927 as a reporter after studying English at the University of Iowa. He never received his college diploma, however, because he refused to take military training; a prerequisite course for graduation.

Before Eyerly became managing editor, he served as a copy editor, telegraph editor and assistant managing editor for The Register. Along the way he covered the roaring 1920s, the Depression, World War II and the Vietnam War. Eyerly also served as president of the Associated Press Managing Editors and was a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Known as "the old white fox" among his contemporaries, Eyerly had plenty of friends and enemies. The same sharp tongue and quick temper that drove his staff to excellence also led to hard feelings among some colleagues.

This thesis explores the life of this man who came from humble origins to become one of the most respected editors in the country. It will explore his approach to running a newspaper, both in terms of how he presented the news, and how he managed his staff. (There are a wide range of opinions regarding Eyerly. Upon his death in 1997 at age 93, numerous columns -- both positive and negative -- were published.)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my grandmother, Jeannette Eyerly, and to my parents, Joseph and Susan Pichler, for their unwavering support; to the former employees of the Des Moines Register, for their time and interest in this thesis.

And to my grandfather, Frank R. Eyerly, without whom this project would not have been possible.
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When it came to deciding what would go on Page 1 of the Des Moines Register every night, there were no meetings or group discussions. For the 23 years that he was the managing editor of The Register, from 1946 to 1969, Frank R. Eyerly planned that newspaper as he ran it: out of his back pocket.

The scene repeated itself day after day. At 4:30 in the afternoon, Eyerly would come out of his office and look over the shoulders of the news editors, city editors and telegraph editor. He would go over the story list and art, then move over to the copy desk where he would tell the slot-man what he wanted on the front page.

After planning Page 1, Eyerly would check in with executive editor Kenneth MacDonald, and then head home to 231 42nd St., where he would eat a good dinner, watch the news--and wait.

Back at The Register's office on 8th Street, the night editors and designers touched up stories, slapped on headlines and sent the paper's first edition to press. The first edition came out at 9:30 and was distributed to the far reaches of the state.

At 9:30 p.m. a Register worker or intern would be dispatched to carry a copy of the first edition to the Yellow Cab that waited every night by The Register's front door. The Yellow Cab drivers knew two things: that they were to take the paper to Eyerly's residence, and that they were not to ascend the steep, narrow driveway at 231 42nd St. in deference to Eyerly's lawn. Years later, after Eyerly retired, Yellow Cab drivers still knew not to go up the Eyerlys' driveway when they were called to take a family member to the airport or train station.
Eyerly took that hand-delivered first edition, which his daughter Susan thought was printed just for him, and read it like his readers would. Nursing a drink and dragging on a Benson and Hedges cigarette, Eyerly critiqued the day’s stories, headlines and layout. Then he put in a call to the newsroom.

Stories buried in the middle of the paper were moved to the front page. Some front page stories were given greater prominence; others were taken completely off the page. When all of the corrections were made, The Register was sent back to the presses. The Des Moines edition rolled off around 2 a.m. in the morning.

The nightly call from Eyerly to his staff was often obscenity-laced and usually left the night editors cringing. Indeed, the atmosphere in the newsroom while editors waited for Eyerly’s call was “like waiting word from headquarters...is he angry, is he upset?” reporter Gene Raffensperger said.

“God, I used to tremble when that phone rang,” said one editor. “He loved to get on that phone and chew us out on the way we had used various stories.”

News editor George Hanrahan said that after Eyerly retired, he still cringed for two years when the telephone rang after 9:00 p.m.

The result of Eyerly’s calls, however, was a paper that consistently ranked as one of the country’s 10 best while Eyerly was managing editor. During Eyerly’s reign, the Register won more Pulitzer Prizes than any other paper except the New York Times. It reached a Sunday circulation of more than 500,000 at its zenith.

It was a paper that, like its masthead boasted, Iowans truly depended on.

Chapter 1 - Humble Beginnings

Look to the northward, Stranger
Just over the barn roof, there.
Have you ever in your travels seen
A land more passing fair?¹

- James Norman Hall, 1898

At the turn of the century, Newton, Iowa, was like many other Midwest towns. It relied heavily on agriculture. Few houses had indoor plumbing or furnaces. Pieces of ice on the porch served as refrigerators. Its population numbered about 1,750.

Frank Rinehart Eyerly extended Newton's population by one on June 3, 1903. He was the fifth son of Celia Grandrath Eyerly and Josiah Bartlett Eyerly.

Celia was raised in Grant County, Wisconsin. She was 44 when Eyerly was born. Josiah was 69, and had already lived quite a life.

Josiah was born in Lexington, Ohio, on Oct. 28, 1834. He grew up on a farm; his father was a carpenter. At the age of 18, Josiah moved to Monroe, Iowa, where he worked as a clerk in a dry-goods store, and as Prairie City's postmaster. Two years later he was appointed postmaster of Monroe.

In September 1861 President Abraham Lincoln called 300,000 men to fight in the Civil War. Josiah enlisted in Company B of the 13th Iowa infantry as a private. He was promoted to sergeant major after the Battle of Shiloh, and then became a first lieutenant. He later served with General Ulysses S. Grant in the 17th Army Corps.

On Nov. 1, 1864, Josiah was honorably discharged from the service. He returned to Monroe and was elected County Treasurer of Jasper County in 1865 before moving to Newton, where he entered the real estate business.

Josiah’s first wife, Charlotte Piper, died in 1868, just one year after their marriage. She left him with one son, William. He married his second wife, Zerna Townsend, in 1879. Zerna died in 1886. They had no children.

On Sept. 24, 1889, Josiah married Celia Grandrath with whom he had five children: Josiah, Fred, Ralph, John and Frank.

Josiah Sr. died on March 11, 1907, when Frank was just three years old, leaving Celia to raise the boys on her own. She never remarried. She supported her family on the real estate that Josiah had acquired. When things got really tight she would sell a piece of the property.

Frank seldom mentioned his years growing up in Newton, although he told a few tales. He survived emergency surgery on his kitchen table at a young age when his appendix burst.

He was close to only one brother, Fred, who was 12 years his senior and who owned a successful hardware store in Oregon, and then California. Frank visited Fred a few times in Oregon, making the trip in a Model T.

The only time Frank drove in his life was during these years; as an adult he never got a license and would have his wife, Jeannette, take him to and from work.

His relationship with his other brothers was tepid, especially with John, who had a tendency to lose money quickly and who was five years older than Frank. However, while John was not particularly fiscally responsible, he was an intellectual and kept the
Eyerly household full of books and magazines. John sparked Frank’s interest in the liberal arts, an interest that he never lost.

Fittingly, the only permanent records of Frank’s early life are reflected in the two things he loved most: scouting and his early efforts at journalism.

The Lone Scout

From an early age, Eyerly was fascinated with the outdoors. The same Midwestern beauty that attracted James Norman Hall also called to Eyerly. He wanted to spend as much time as possible in Iowa’s woods and the Skunk River - the same river that Hall rhapsodizes about in his autobiography. And more than anything, Eyerly wanted to be a Boy Scout.

Unfortunately, the Boy Scouts did not have a chapter in Newton. There was, however, an organization that met Eyerly’s needs, the Lone Scout Organization (LSO). Being a Lone Scout had a tremendous influence on Eyerly’s life.

As a Lone Scout Eyerly was able to explore his love of the outdoors. He participated in meetings and campouts which, on the whole, were rewarding experiences, although Eyerly later said that being a Lone Scout introduced him to one nasty habit. It was on a Lone Scout camping trip that Eyerly took his first drag from a cigarette.

“I didn’t smoke again until I was 18, and I shouldn’t have started then,” he later said of the habit that he finally kicked at the age of 90.²

More important than giving him his first taste of tobacco, however, the Lone Scouts gave Eyerly his first taste of editing. One of the ways the LSO raised money was through various monthly magazines. There were LSO-affiliated magazines across the United States.

At the age of 16 Eyerly founded The Hawkeye Scout, which combined book reviews with a gossip column and advice for outdoorsmen. The monthly magazine’s annual subscription rate of 20 cents was a way to finance and support the organization that Eyerly loved. In a 1917 editorial Eyerly explained the magazine’s purpose.

The many tribe papers are becoming more and more prosperous. Lone Scouts are beginning to realize that the future of the organization rests directly on the members and that amateur journalists are, above all others, best equipped to carry on the Lone Star idea for the benefit of the coming generation.3

The magazine’s “Not the oldest but the best” moniker was typically brash. Its circulation peaked at about 500 copies a month.

Eyerly was a fan of scouting for his entire life. He amassed a large collection of both fictitious and field books that dealt with scouting. Among his favorites was “The Boy Scouts of Berkshire.”

‘I Never Dare to Write As Funny As I Can’

Eyerly’s life in journalism took shape at an early age. The summer before his freshman year at Newton High, Eyerly worked in the print shop of Newton’s weekly

3“Editorials.” The Hawkeye Scout. 1917.
newspaper. He was also a newspaper carrier salesmen, then carrier supervisor for the Des Moines Capital while at Newton High.

In addition to publishing and editing The Hawkeye Scout, Eyerly was active in his high school paper, Newtonia, and wrote a column under the pseudonym Jazz. The column was called 'Jazzed Miniatures.'

Eyerly's column took a light look at the school, but it also provided a glimpse of Eyerly's ever-present dry wit. In the Dec. 16, 1921, issue, Eyerly caricatured some of his classmates under the guise of a school psychology teacher who had supposedly lent the newspaper his notes on various members of the school. Eyerly introduced the teacher at the top of his column

We have in our midst a professor of expert psychology, a character sketcher, as it were. He looks at people when they do not notice him and jots down all outstanding characteristics. With these notes in hand he sinks into a mood of Socratic contemplation wherein, he judges them and then writes of them exactly as they really are. They are not retouched. He has consented to let us publish some of them.

Eyerly went on to describe his classmates. Of Loys French he wrote, "slim features, small and slight in appearance, bobbed hair, very talkative, favorite expression - 'Oh, kid, I was so thrilled.'" Tiny Grudman had "generous features, large and elephant-like in appearance, not especially graceful...to be found in the lower hallway most any time with any girl who happens to be there." Gerald Simpson had somewhat better luck. "Good looking, pug nose...thinks Nadine S. is a nice girl, very much so, loafs in Corner Drug Store... favorite expression - 'Oh, daddy.'"

4"Jazzed Miniatures." Newtonia, Dec. 16, 1921.
Eyerly also served as class treasurer his senior year; was the debating society president in 1922; and was in the Spanish Club for two years. All of these posts undoubtedly enriched Eyerly’s life, but his first love was always, unmistakably journalism, as evidenced by his senior quote in the high school yearbook.

“I never dare to write as funny as I can.”

F.R.E.

Eyerly spent a year as an advertising salesman for the Newton Daily News before entering the University of Iowa in fall 1923. Newspapering literally paid his way through college.

Eyerly studied English at the university and continued to heavily involve himself in journalism. He was both a copy editor and a columnist for the Daily Iowan, the university’s student newspaper. He also served as an assistant editor for the Iowa Literary Magazine and was the editor-in-chief for Frivol, a humor magazine, in 1927.

Eyerly’s Daily Iowan column was called “Chills and Fever.” The column provided Eyerly a forum to discuss serious matters that interested him, but also gave him the chance to do something he loved: stir things up and push people’s buttons. It was a tactic Eyerly used, often with glee, throughout his professional life.

In an October 1925 column, Eyerly commented on a troubling trend that was developing in campus elections. He called it the vanishing voter.

The passing of election day with its attendant glory of electioneering, sly remarks about “things being sewed up tight,” and wild, wild work
on the part of certain campus celebrities brings forth memories of other elections, when men were really men and election day meant something.5

In the column Eyerly noted that only 1,115 students turned out for the Oct. 8, 1925, class elections, despite the fact that school enrollment was considerably larger than in 1921, when 1,184 students had cast votes. He surmised that tame and uninteresting campaigns were part of the problem.

The totals for yesterday’s election, only 1,115 votes, in a university that has been growing by leaps and bounds for the last 10 years reveals that the “vanishing voter” is vanishing from college campuses as well as civil life. J. Howard Sheldon, minor impressario of the liberal party, credits this lack of interest in class elections to the weak and puerile manner in which elections have been conducted for several years past. “Revival of blood and thunder methods with the essential publicity and spellbinding,” said Sheldon in an interview last night, “would result in heightened interest on the part of the student body.”6

Frivol, on the other hand, was essentially a collection of humorous sayings and cartoons submitted by anonymous staff members and students. “Tid Bits” submitted this yarn in April 1927.

Two Scotchman went bathing.
One said: I’ll bet you sixpence I can stay underwater longer than you.
The Other said: All right.
Both submerged. The police are still looking for the bodies.7

6“Blood and thunder campaigns things of past in L.A. elections.”
7Frivol, April 1927.
This type of humor appealed to Eyerly. Even after he became managing editor of
The Register and The Tribune, he periodically submitted and occasionally published
humorous observations in Better Homes & Gardens. In 1949 he published this ditty.

A lawyer I know suffered terribly from insomnia until he broke down
and built a house in our neighborhood a year or so ago. Now he buys
grass seed and garden tools with the money he used to spend on sleeping pills.8

Whether Eyerly published his own observations in Frivol is unknown. No saying
in the magazine, which came out every month and cost 25 cents, was ever attributed to
ˈJazzˈ or F.R.E., as Eyerly was more commonly known during his time on campus.

Eyerly was indeed a popular figure on campus. The Daily Iowan profiled him in
1927 in its “Who’s Who” column. The lead of the story summed up Eyerly’s chutzpah
perfectly.

We found Frank R. Eyerly at the editorial desk of Frivol with his
feet parked comfortably on the desk before him. In one hand he had his
head, and in the other, a copy of James Branch Cabel. “You are about to
be interviewed,” he was informed. “All right,” he replied, without removing
the feet.9

The article examined Eyerly’s view of college life as a senior. He was asked
about the value of a college education and about the college experience.

It seems to me that too many of us fail to appreciate the campus scene
for all it is worth; as a matter of fact, these four years at Iowa should provide
a man with some of the elements of a liberal education, as well as the ability
to snort critically when some new effigy is elevated to the top of the smoke
stack, and held there for every man to respond.

Any man who fails to make friends in a place like this should be
consigned to a Coventry, along with any doubting Thomas who fails to find
entertainment within the select ranks of those co-eds who grace the campus.10

8Better Homes and Gardens, December 1949.
10“Who’s Who at Iowa.”
Given Eyerly’s high regard for education, and that as managing editor he never hired reporters without college educations, it is ironic that he never received his diploma from the University of Iowa after four years of study in which he attained a number of credits that exceeded the graduation requirement.

The reason? Eyerly refused to enroll in a mandatory military training class. There apparently was nothing, not even a diploma, that could change Eyerly’s utter disinterest in physical activity. As an adult he joked that whenever he felt the urge to exercise, he would lie down until the urge went away, a phrase coined by Robert Maynard Hutchins.

By 1927 Eyerly was ready to enter the workforce with or without his diploma, and he landed a job as a reporter for The Des Moines Tribune, an afternoon paper that was owned by the same family that owned The Des Moines Register.

Eyerly wasn’t the only Iowa graduate to head toward the capital. Ken MacDonald, a fellow copy reader on the Daily Iowan, secured a job with The Des Moines Register, and he and Eyerly rented an apartment together.

It was the beginning of a legacy; 19 years later MacDonald was The Register’s and Tribune’s executive editor, and Eyerly was both papers’ managing editor. Meanwhile, the University of Iowa was mourning one of its finest students, if technically not one of its most distinguished alumni. Eyerly, true to form, helped the process of bereavement.

F.R.E, as he is know about the campus, concludes the year as editor-in-chief of Frivol and politician of some importance, and leaves what he has termed the promised land to seek out an existence in the
field of journalism. That he will be missed is obvious — as he so frequently
reminds the chapter; that he will be difficult to replace is also obvious — as
the chapter agrees with a patient sigh.11

11Iowa Literary Magazine, 1927.
Chapter 2 - The Early Years; Eyerly and MacDonald

In the fall of 1927 Eyerly went to Des Moines to start work as a reporter on The Des Moines Tribune, an afternoon paper that was owned by Gardner Cowles, who also owned the larger, more prestigious Des Moines Register.

The Register and The Tribune had a complex relationship. They were owned by the same family and were based in the same building, but they maintained separate staffs and were competitive.

At the same time it was common for young reporters to start on The Tribune and then move on to The Register after they gained more experience.

Eyerly wasn’t alone in Des Moines. One of his best friends from the University of Iowa, Ken MacDonald, came with him. They shared an apartment for five years in the Victoria Hotel.

Eyerly reported for The Tribune for about a year before moving to The Register as a copy editor, where he joined his friend MacDonald, who was already on the copy desk. Only a year out of school, the two had already attained their goal of working for Iowa’s big paper.

The Register was sort of the goal in those days for a great many of the journalism students at the university. In the first place, on the campus at any rate, it had a very good reputation as a newspaper, and then it was the closest daily paper of any real size to the campus, so many of us who were in journalism school at the university had sort of a goal of trying to get a job on the Register.¹

¹Ken MacDonald, interviewed by author, 20 March 1998, Des Moines, Iowa.
Eyerly moved up quickly through the ranks after he joined The Register: copy editor, telegraph editor and then head of the copy desk, or the slot man, where he assigned stories to copy men, supervised the editing of stories and approved headlines.

He usually left for work around 4 p.m. and would arrive home in the early hours of the morning. Eyerly was usually too wired to fall asleep after his evening duties were complete, and he and MacDonald often had a beer after work and discussed the day’s news. Then Eyerly would come home and read before finally falling asleep as dawn broke.

Sleeping was sometimes a challenge for Eyerly, starting in 1936 with the arrival of his first daughter, Jane. His second daughter, Susan, followed in 1939.

Jane arrived four years after Eyerly married Jeannette Hyde in December 1932. After attending Drake University for three years, Hyde graduated from the University of Iowa in 1930, then worked in radio where she hosted a show with Ronald Reagan. Hyde went on to become a nationally known author of books for young adults, and her universal interests meshed perfectly with Eyerly’s.

“What he hadn’t read and wasn’t interested in, she had and was,” Register reporter Jim Flansburg said.

They met when Eyerly covered a Drake University arts performance for The Tribune that Hyde was helping organize.
By the time they were married, Eyerly was working for The Register, but their engagement made the front page of his old paper which reveled in scooping the bigger paper. The headline ran, ‘Frank Eyerly To Take Wife; Whose Scoop?’

What Iowa morning paper is scooped when this story of the approaching marriage of its telegraph editor is published? Des Moines Register Telegraph Editor Frank Eyerly will Mendelassohn it Dec. 6 with Miss Jeannette Hyde. She’s the publicity gal here with Paramount Publix.²

That marked the beginning of a successful 64-year marriage, although there was some confusion on his wife’s part during the early years about what exactly Eyerly did on the desk. One day Jeannette asked him what she should tell her friends when they asked about this.

“You tell them that I’m a slot man,” Eyerly said with pride.³

During his years as a Register news editor and assistant managing editor, Eyerly helped form The Register’s coverage of events like the Depression and World War II. Flansburg later said that Eyerly’s performance as a news editor during the war deserved to be put in a book.

A daily staple of Register coverage became detailed maps highlighting where major battles were being fought. On June 6, 1942, The Register reported on the invasion of Normandy complete with a three-column map marking the various distances between England and France, and where the battles had occurred.

²“Frank Eyerly to take wife; whose scoop?” The Des Moines Tribune, Nov. 18, 1932.
"With limited space available he was just able to bring that whole goddamned war into a sense of completeness each day. The old timers would have said that was the high point of his career," Flansburg said.

'These Were Gentleman'

Throughout this time MacDonald, who had started at The Register one year before Eyerly, was always one position above Eyerly. When MacDonald was promoted, so was Eyerly. The only break in their professional relationship came when MacDonald left The Register to fight in World War II. It was as if nothing had happened when he returned. He and Eyerly continued to move through the ranks together.

MacDonald literally talked his way into a job on The Register's copy desk after graduating from Iowa. He walked in to see The Register's managing editor without an appointment and asked for a job. The editor said there were no vacancies, but MacDonald persisted and finally, out of annoyance, the editor told MacDonald that the slot man, Rex Large, was looking for a copy editor with 10 years of experience.

"You don't think you could fill that job, do you?" the editor asked MacDonald sarcastically. MacDonald said he would try.

I saw Rex Large standing across the newsroom and I recognized him because he had made a talk at the university at some point, so I went over and introduced myself and said, 'Mr. Waymack tells me you're looking for a copy editor,' which was true as far as it went. He was a very stern man and he glared at me for a minute and said, 'how much experience have you had?' He was obviously in a very bad mood that morning and he said, 'Did they teach you in journalism school that newspaper men never make any money?'" 

4Ken MacDonald interview.
The question took MacDonald by surprise. He responded he had not studied the economics of journalism during the course of his college studies. Large suggested that MacDonald leave The Register building, walk east for a few blocks, and apply for a job at the Equitable Life Insurance Co.

“Five years from now you’ll thank me,” Large told MacDonald.

And I said, ‘Hell, I don’t want to be an insurance salesman, I want to be a newspaper man.’ He glared at me for a minute or two, and he said, ‘OK, be here tomorrow night at 6 p.m. and I’ll try you out for a couple of months.’ So of course I was just scared to death during those two months that I’d be fired at any minute. But I managed to survive.’

Eyerly and MacDonald reached the top in 1946, with MacDonald becoming executive editor and Eyerly managing editor of The Register and The Tribune. As executive editor, MacDonald reported directly to Gardner Cowles, Jr., who followed his father, Gardner Cowles, as the president of The Register and Tribune Co. MacDonald was technically responsible for everything that appeared in the news columns and the editorial pages.

Lauren Soth ran the editorial pages and had a staff of nine writers. Soth wrote the 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial that proposed agricultural exchanges between the United States and U.S.S.R., and which led to Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa in 1959. Soth had total control of the editorial pages, a fact that was demonstrated when MacDonald retired as editor of The Register.

At MacDonald’s retirement dinner Gardner Cowles, Jr., said he had never agreed with The Register’s editorial policies on agriculture.

5Ken MacDonald interview.
The room of a dozen or so editors and writers was silent, thunderstruck. For years, Cowles had sat silent, content to let MacDonald and Soth and their lessors do their thing, carve and argue for the farm policies they thought were right.6

Eyerly and Soth had a cantankerous relationship. Eyerly regarded Soth’s editorials as limp-wristed liberalism; Soth regarded Eyerly as a budding fascist. However, there was always a mutual respect between the two men.

If they ever had words, I do not know of it. If either ever tried to undercut the other, I do not know of it. We’ve hit the point where I want to use the line that I regard as key. These were gentlemen. They were hard bastards, but they were gentlemen.7

With Soth in charge of the editorial pages, Eyerly was left to run the rest of the paper. As he did with Soth, MacDonald gave Eyerly complete control of the news columns.

Technically, I was responsible for everything that appeared in the news columns, but obviously an editor delegates a good bit of that. And so I relied on Frank to handle the news columns. We’d frequently talk about the news and what was most important and so on, but I was happy to delegate to Frank the complete responsibility for running the news columns because he was a superb editor. There was no need to be looking over his shoulder.8

‘Hi God’

Eyerly and MacDonald’s personalities could not have been more different. Where MacDonald never left his office without his suit jacket, Eyerly often came into the newsroom with no jacket and with his shirtsleeves rolled up.

6“Soth was an editor from a bygone era.” *Ames Tribune*, Feb. 23, 1998.
7Jim Flansburg, interviewed by author, 18 March 1998, Des Moines, Iowa.
8Ken MacDonald interview.
Eyerly had a ferocious temper; MacDonald was mild-mannered. MacDonald was a social figure in Des Moines; not as many people knew Eyerly outside of the newspaper business.

MacDonald had this royal character about him. Tall, very dignified looking guy, slender, well over six feet tall, gray, immaculately tailored suits. Quiet, never said anything but with his presence in the newsroom, you felt like God was in there.9

Barbara Mack, a copy girl for The Tribune who later became a lawyer and journalism professor, once remarked, “Hi Don, hi Steve, hi God,” as she ran past MacDonald and two reporters.10

“MacDonald’s personality was much more formal. Sort of a courtly personality. Frank’s personality was as a curmudgeon, as a character,” Register reporter Nick Kotz said.11

There was never any doubt among staffers at The Register and Tribune that Eyerly was in charge of news content. But in other matters, it was not quite so clear where Eyerly stopped and MacDonald began.

They had the highest regard for each other, which was demonstrated one day during Kotz’s early years with the paper. Kotz uncovered a number of police corruption stories with the help of an informant who was testifying against the officers. The informant often called Kotz requesting cigarettes, toothpaste and gum.

9Gene Raffensperger, interviewed by author, 19 March 1998, Des Moines, Iowa.
10“Eyerly’s test was a tough one to pass.” Ames Tribune, May 23, 1997.
One evening the informant called Kotz and told him that he had information on
the mob in Chicago, and that he planned to talk with U.S. Attorney General Robert
Kennedy. The informant asked for Kotz's help in reaching Kennedy.

And I was so excited about this, and Frank wasn't around, so I
went up to MacDonald's office and told him about the story. And MacDonald
said, very gently, 'I think you'd better go to Frank Eyerly with this.'
I learned something. When you jump over the chain of command, you'd better
know what you're doing.12

'They Were One'

One of the gripes against Eyerly among Register and Tribune reporters was that
he underpaid them.

'To be honest, nobody was making a whole lot of money,' Register reporter Gene
Raffensperger said.

Although he didn't think about it during his years at The Register, Raffensperger
said he later wondered whether Eyerly took the hits for implementing policies, like the
low salaries, that originated with MacDonald.

I think that people were afraid, if not afraid, people who thought they
had been held down financially for a long time, the damn just broke.
'OK, Frank's gone, and now we've got a new guy, let's get some money
here.' You know things just changed when Frank left, and let go of a
steel grip, I think everybody thought the hell with it, this is a new deal, we're
going to get some money, and they did. But I'm not sure that it was (Frank's)
fault. That may have been MacDonald. I don't know whose fault that
was, but nobody was making much money back then.13

12 Nick Kotz interview.
13 Gene Raffensperger interview.
Following Eyerly's retirement, staffers held two guild elections, both of which were narrowly voted down. However, the point had been made. Following the elections, salaries were increased.

Register reporter Jim Flansburg also questions how separate Eyerly and MacDonald were, and cites Eyerly's retirement as an example. When Eyerly told MacDonald that he planned on retiring in 1968, MacDonald told Eyerly to find his own replacement.

The replacement, Register editor Ed Heins, proved a disappointment. Heins lacked the breadth of knowledge that Eyerly had and didn’t take the broad approach to news that The Register was famous for. MacDonald said that Heins’ other flaw, in Eyerly’s eyes, was that he wasn’t Eyerly, but MacDonald also acknowledges that Heins was a “disappointment.” After three years, Heins was replaced by Michael Gartner.

Who was responsible for hiring Heins is still unclear.

"Eyerly, to his dying day, believed that Heins had been MacDonald’s idea, and I’m telling you that MacDonald believes that Heins was Eyerly’s idea," Flansburg said.

Thirty years later MacDonald is still certain that Eyerly appointed Heins, although MacDonald said he supported the choice. MacDonald said he left that decision up to Eyerly, since Eyerly had the best idea about who was the most capable on the staff.

While Flansburg is not certain about who was responsible for hiring Heins, he is sure that Eyerly often took the hits for unpopular policies that came from MacDonald.

That’s a really complicated thing. It was a yin and yang, so that you don’t know where one leaves off and the other begins. MacDonald was not a micro-manager. He’d delegate authority and never look back. But he was a commanding figure. There was never any doubt. And he

14Nick Kotz interview.
was widely loved by the very same people who denounced Eyerly - the editor who might have been, they conceded, merely executing orders laid down by MacDonald. The troops loved one and hated the other without realizing, until the sun began to set, that they were one.¹⁵

Register Reporter Don Kaul agreed that Eyerly was MacDonald’s strongman,

“and that’s as it should have been. That was his job. He wouldn’t say Mac wants this or Mac wants that. He would say this is the way it is.”

There was only one exception to that that I can remember. I wrote a column on Barry Goldwater, making fun of him, and it happened to be at a time when there were several other things going on making fun of Goldwater and Mac thought it was excessive and he killed the column, and Frank told me that, rather than saying he was killing the column. But for the most part he was the front man for whatever he and Mac decided they wanted.¹⁶

Flansburg summed up The Register during the Eyerly and MacDonald years this way:

I suppose it could be best be described as in a feudal sense. It was Mike Cowles, Jr., as the King, MacDonald as the Duke and Eyerly as Lord of the Manor. There was a cartoon during WWII of a couple of officers standing on a hill looking at a setting sun, and one says to the other, ‘Do you suppose they have a sunset for the enlisted men?’ And I always thought of Eyerly and MacDonald in that way.¹⁷

¹⁵Jim Flansburg interview.
¹⁶Don Kaul, phone interview by author, 22 April 1998, Washington, D.C.
¹⁷Don Kaul interview.
Chapter 3 - Eyerly and His Reporters

One of the ironies in Eyerly’s professional life was that he enjoyed good relationships with his reporters, despite the fact that he didn’t really understand what they did. For the most part, Eyerly trusted reporters to do their jobs, and he knew enough to stay out of their ways.

As a result, The Register flourished under his direction. Two reporters, Clark Mollenhoff and Nick Kotz, won Pulitzer Prizes while working directly under Eyerly. The Register won a total of eight Pulitzers during his 23-year reign as managing editor.

Much of Eyerly’s success must be attributed to his external situation. The Register and The Tribune, which was killed in 1982, were owned by John and Gardner Cowles, Jr., chairman and president of The Register and Tribune Co., respectively, during Eyerly’s time as managing editor.

Gardner Cowles, Sr., had purchased the papers in 1903. The Cowles family sold the Register to Gannett Co. in 1985.

The Cowles were dedicated to covering the state and supplied Eyerly the manpower to do so. He had more than 300 correspondents in Des Moines and across Iowa, and license to do what he wanted. It was the perfect situation for him.

Eyerly was managing editor of both The Register and The Tribune, but he clearly favored The Register, which became Iowa’s marquee paper. The two staffs were competitive, although on occasion The Tribune used The Register to break a story. When a story started to get hot, Tribune staff would tip off Register reporters, then keep
covering the story themselves, explaining to their sources, friends and neighbors that they had no alternative because “the big, bad Register was on the story.”

The Tribune covered Des Moines; the Register covered the state and beyond. A six-man bureau worked in Washington, D.C., headed by Eyerly’s old college pal Dick Wilson. Ken MacDonald, the Register’s executive editor, together with Eyerly helped push the Register’s circulation past 500,000 at its zenith.

While his talents as an editor were unmistakable, Eyerly was also clearly in the right place at the right time.

I really do not believe in the great-man theory of history. Had he not been with the Cowles family, which was dedicated to the practice of good journalism; had he not been teamed with MacDonald, who was a really fine editor to work for, he might have been a failure... .If the U.S. Army had been in Garrison from 1905 to 1950, George Patton would have been a terrible failure.

‘You Didn’t Really Direct Those Guys, You Just Got Out of Their Way’

Eyerly had no idea how to get a media pass to cover the State House. He had no clue how to get a press pass to the White House. He didn’t know the ins-and-outs of covering the police beat.

Eyerly wasn’t interested in the fine details of reporting, an attitude that nicely reflects his overall management style at the Register. He was interested in results and he gave reporters the freedom to get them.

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1“‘The Register’s fall is bad for Iowa,’” Ames Tribune, June 27, 1997.
2Jim Flansburg interview.
During the late 1960s, as the country was experiencing the height of Vietnam protests, Eyerly dispatched Register reporter Jim Flansburg to investigate Parsons College in Iowa. Eyerly and Flansburg suspected that Parsons was really a "diploma mill" that offered sanctuary for young men who wanted to avoid the draft.

Flansburg spent a year at Parsons and wrote a two-part series lambasting the teaching standards and curriculum at the university. The Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools took away Parsons' accreditation as a result of the series, and the university ultimately went broke.

Flansburg was not expected to check in with Eyerly every day with the latest developments on the story.

"This was an editor simply saying to a reporter, 'I think there's a story there, go get it,'" Flansburg said. "It was just a very common thing. He recognized that reporters were competent, intelligent human beings."

Flansburg, an Eyerly favorite, was able to push Eyerly's relaxed attitude with reporters to heights Eyerly's editors could not have dreamed of. Flansburg once spent two months profiling the Meskwaki Indians, only to come back to the newsroom without a piece because he "didn't understand them."

Flansburg also took one summer off after a long reporting stint. Eyerly finally called Flansburg's wife, Carol, and said, "Tell me, does Jim still work for us?" Flansburg returned to work the next day, without repercussions from Eyerly.

While Flansburg enjoyed great leeway with Eyerly, he was also a first-rate reporter. One spring Eyerly decided to publish a series of profiles on the cities in Iowa.
The story was assigned to several other reporters who failed to get Eyerly what he wanted. Eyerly then turned to Flansburg.

He was your typical editor. Couldn’t tell you what he wanted, but had a really good sense of what he didn’t want. Finally he told (city editor) John Zug, ‘My god, if you can’t find somebody to do it, I’ll find a reporter who can.’ Eyerly went to my boss and said he wanted me to do that series and they cut some kind of deal where I covered City Hall on Mondays, and then worked on the series the other four days of the week. In any event, we brought it off; it was a very, very successful thing. The following year, I proposed a repeat, doing a series of profiles on prominent Iowans. I suppose I invested damn near six months of work in it, where no one ever checked on what I was doing or how. ‘Things coming along? Good.’ That was it. He bet on people.\(^3\)

Clark Mollenhoff joined the Register in 1942 after receiving a law degree from Drake University. As a young reporter, Mollenhoff covered local government, and tended to Jeannette Eyerly’s lawn to make extra money.

Mollenhoff was smart and aggressive, and in 1950 Eyerly dispatched him to the Register’s Washington bureau. Mollenhoff’s assignment was vague. Eyerly didn’t expect a story every day, or even a story every week. He told Mollenhoff just to dig around and see what he could come up with.

This was precisely the kind of an assignment that I had been dreaming about, but suddenly I felt cold, lost, and a little afraid that I would not be able to produce. I didn’t know the territory, and felt I could never top my performance at the (Polk County) courthouse.\(^4\)

Mollenhoff produced plenty. He became a nationally renowned reporter famous for his bulldog-style of reporting. One time President Dwight Eisenhower asked Mollenhoff to sit down during a news conference. Mollenhoff refused.

\(^3\)Jim Flansburg interview.  
He once creeped on his hands and knees along a narrow edge outside the second floor of the Polk County Courthouse to gain admission to meeting from which he'd been barred.

One Christmas Eve, Mollenhoff knocked on the door of Ezra Taft Benson, Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture, introduced himself and interviewed Benson as the secretary sat in his bathrobe and opened presents with his family.

And "in a tribute to the fact that the Iowan had been as responsible as anyone for his predicament," a jail-bound Jimmy Hoffa spat at Mollenhoff.5

In 1958 Mollenhoff was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles that exposed racketeering among some union leaders.

"We used to say he invented investigative reporting," Eyerly said upon Mollenhoff's death at age 69. "He was aggressive, honest and fair. I don't think he ever let his enthusiasm for an issue warp his writing."

In 1969 Mollenhoff resigned his newspaper job to become a special counsel to President Richard Nixon. He resigned from that post a year later, and became The Register's Washington bureau chief. He also became one of Nixon's sharpest critics, and immediately saw the ramifications of the Watergate burglary and coverup. In a Aug. 5, 1972, letter to Eyerly, Mollenhoff wrote,

The court actions on the burglary bugging and the GAO investigation could create a real major problem for Nixon in the month ahead, for it will be possible for the Democrats to subpoena essentially anyone -- including John Mitchell and Chuck Colson -- for questioning on the incident.6

6Letter to Frank Eyerly from Clark Mollenhoff, 5 August 1972.
Mollenhoff left the bureau in 1977 to become a professor at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va. In his later years he often testified as an expert witness at libel trials.

Mollenhoff's success was due in large part to his intelligence, and physical and mental toughness. He recovered from a car crash that left him with a broken back, he survived a brain tumor, and a cancer left him blind in one eye. But he also benefited from the space given to him by an editor who once told him to go to the capital, root around, and see what he could find.

"With guys like Mollenhoff, you didn't really direct those guys, you just sort of got out of their way and allowed them to go where they wanted to go," Raffensperger said.

When Eyerly retired in 1969, Mollenhoff wrote him a three-page letter.

It has been a great 27 years since you first interviewed me in the old Register and Tribune newsroom, and there is no way I could overstate the importance of Frank Eyerly on my own career. . . . The labor racket investigations would not have moved forward if it had not been for your understanding of the issues, and the active support that made it possible to cover this story when other editors were blind to, or wished to overlook, the importance of corrupt labor power. . . . If someone had told us in 1941 to sit down and write the most exciting fiction possible about newspaper coverage of government, I doubt if we could have produced anything as filled with action and drama as the real stories we have lived since then.7

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7Letter to Frank Eyerly from Clark Mollenhoff, 13 January 1969.
'Damn Proud To Be a Register Reporter'

Nick Kotz joined The Register in 1958 after a stint in the Marine Corps. Before that Kotz had graduated cum laude from Dartmouth University and studied at The London School of Economics.

His goal was to eventually write for the Register's Washington Bureau. Eyerly and MacDonald told Kotz that his ambition was reasonable.

"They suggested that if I was good and fulfilled their expectations it was reasonable that I would end up in Washington. And looking back, I took that as a sign of leadership," Kotz said. 8

During his time at the Register Kotz never referred to Eyerly or MacDonald by their first names.

"It was always Mr. Eyerly and Mr. MacDonald," Kotz said. "Most editors and reporters called them Frank and Ken. I never once called either one by their first names. I don't know if that meant anything to them, but it meant something to me."

Kotz's career at The Register was nothing short of spectacular. After six years of covering city and state politics, Kotz was promoted to Washington. Like Mollenhoff, Kotz had free rein to cover the stories that interested him.

Kotz said this support never wavered, even when the stories adversely affected the Register, as was the case in 1968 when Kotz began working on a series of stories examining unsanitary practices in meat packing plants. The series led to the Pulitzer Prize for Kotz and The Register.

8Nick Kotz interview.
Kotz became aware of the meat packing plant conditions while playing handball one day. His regular opponent, who worked for Iowa Congressman Neil Smith, told Kotz about reports the Department of Agriculture were releasing that reviewed unsanitary conditions in non-federally inspected meat-packing plants.

Kotz wrote more than 50 stories on the topic before President Johnson signed legislation regulating plant practices in 1968. Kotz said Eyerly’s conduct during the investigation, and his response to the Pulitzer Prize, illustrates their relationship, and Eyerly’s loyalty to his reporters.

After I won the Pulitzer Prize I wrote him a letter and I thanked him for his support, for sending me to Washington, his support through the series of dirty meat packing plants and so forth. He wrote me back a note which showed another part of Frank Eyerly that maybe had to do something with his relationship with other reporters than me. He wrote that I’m proud of you, and if I had a son rather than daughters, I would have hoped he would have been someone like you. Of course, that touched me enormously. . . . Later somebody, not Frank Eyerly, sent me a copy of a talk that Eyerly had made to the advertising department. He told them how proud they should be that they sold ads for a newspaper that had happily accepted the loss of $250,000 worth of ads on behalf of my story, because the biggest meat packer in Iowa had pulled their advertising. There had never been a word to me about that.  

Eyerly rebuked Kotz only once, after the reporter erred in the Supreme Court vote in his story about Tinker v. Des Moines, the 1969 case in which the Supreme Court upheld students’ rights to protest the Vietnam conflict.

Kotz’s error made The Register’s first edition before it was corrected. Eyerly was so mad that he kept Kotz’s byline off his stories for two weeks.

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9Nick Kotz interview.
When Eyerly retired, Kotz wrote him a one-paragraph letter summing up his feelings about Eyerly, and his time at the Register.

Mr. Eyerly, All I can say is Thank You. I credit myself with the good sense of recognizing I was encountering something very special when I met you and Mr. MacDonald on a rainy Saturday morning in August, 1958. As the years go by and I see more and more of the newspaper business, I appreciate more deeply that special magic that is yours. I'm damn proud to be a Des Moines Register reporter.10

'I Mean, They Just Went After It'

It was an Eyerly characteristic that once he sensed a trend, he would unleash an avalanche of coverage on that subject. That meant unleashing his reporters on issues like pesticides, dove hunting proposals and, in 1962, liquor. It was a dream assignment for all involved.

At that time in Iowa, liquor could only be purchased in a state liquor store. Taverns were only allowed to serve beer.

Howard Hughes, a candidate in the 1962 Iowa gubernatorial election, maintained that liquor was being sold illegally by the drink in almost every community in Iowa. Eyerly decided to find out for himself. He unleashed his entire staff of reporters to cover every single county in the state of Iowa to find out if liquor could be purchased in a bar.

Strict records were kept by the reporters, who would enter various bars and, without identifying themselves, order a drink. For two consecutive Sundays that summer, the Register ran a report on the tavern practices of every single county in Iowa. Hughes

10Letter to Frank Eyerly from Nick Kotz, 14 May 1968.
was right: Liquor was being sold everywhere. He was elected governor and later served in the U.S. Senate.

Register reporter Gene Raffensperger still laughs about Eyerly’s intensity.

Knowing reporters like you know them, can you imagine being given carte blanche to go out and try and buy a drink some place and have the company pay for it? Hell, they were selling booze everywhere, and (the reports) led to (Hughes’) election. That’s an example of where Frank just unleashed his whole staff on that damn thing. I mean, they just went after it.11

‘It Was Such a Different World’

Unleashing an avalanche of coverage on any given subject was a classic Eyerly’s trait. Taking chances on young reporters was another. In 1961 the Register set up a bureau near Davenport in an effort to take advantage of the growing population in the eastern part of the state.

Raffensperger first worked for the Register when he was at the University of Iowa, then joined the paper full-time in 1955 after a stint in the military. He started on the police beat, which was a standard beginning for young Register reporters. The beat taught reporters how to get around the city, and to mistrust spellings and addresses in police reports.

“What it amounted to was a terrific training ground for young reporters,”

Raffensperger said.

11Gene Raffensperger interview.
Raffensperger was completing his fifth year at The Register when he learned about the new bureau in Davenport. Although he was only 31, Raffensperger asked Eyerly to put him in charge.

So here we are, we're going to open a bureau in eastern Iowa and I'm the guy that's going to do it, and I'm 31 years old, so over I go and it worked out real well for me and for the paper. And I think because of that, I had a special relationship with him. I dealt with him more directly than did other reporters.12

Putting the 31-year-old Raffensperger in charge of the bureau was a chance that paid off. Circulation kept growing and and The Register continued its dominance across the state.

Hiring a man who couldn't type was another intelligent bet made by Eyerly, Flansburg said.

When I came here, I watched this one guy over in the corner of the newsroom. And all he did, it seemed to me, was type. His name was Nick Baldwin, and he eventually went on to become our arts and music critic. Baldwin had a fine education, a fine background, but he didn't know how to type. And so his first job at the Register was to walk to Hyman's Bookstore, get a How To Teach Yourself to Type book, and spend eight hours a day learning to type. And he did.13

Baldwin grew up in Florence, Italy, in a well-connected family. His father was a vice president of Fiat; his grandfather had been Mark Twain's doctor. As a 16-year-old boy, Baldwin was a runner for the British Secret Service during World War II. He later received a Master's Degree in literature from the University of Manchester and had command of several languages. He specialized in Shakespearean plays.

12Gene Raffensperger interview.
13Jim Flansburg interview.
After graduating, Baldwin served in Korea as an intelligence officer for the Marines. He eventually made sergeant.

In 1957 Eyerly hired Baldwin as The Register’s art critic. Baldwin’s background and education made him a natural choice, and he enjoyed a very successful career. After he learned to type.

So here was a man who knew music, having grown up in Florence, knew the graphic arts well, but didn’t know how to type. And you could say, ‘Well, Frank Eyerly took a great chance in hiring that fellow, or no chance at all.’ But he had, and he knew that hiring that guy would be a great benefit to The Register for years to come, and it certainly was. It was such a different world. A place like the Register felt that it could gamble to hire someone, let him or her learn the reporter’s trade in some aspect, and six eight years from now get a decent return on that investment.14

‘I Do Not Think That This Cliche-Ridden Sunday Story Achieved Anything’

While Eyerly gave his good reporters lots of space, he also recognized bad reporting, and he wouldn’t hesitate to make a change if thought reporters weren’t performing up to snuff on their beats.

Eyerly also despised writing that he thought was dumbed down for the reader, and often took issue with stories that other editors praised. On May 17, 1953, Associated Press correspondent Frank O’Brien wrote a 1,000-word story on interest rates. The story, which attempted to explain the debate over whether the government should raise or lower interest rates, was picked by newspapers across the country, including The St. Louis

14Jim Flansburg interview.
Post-Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer and Louisville Courier Journal. It was generally warmly received by editors.

Eyerly, however, took exception to the piece. In a May 25 letter to L.A. Brophy, general business editor for the AP, he registered his complaints. While acknowledging the challenge of editing and writing about complex subjects like interest rates, Eyerly maintained, “I do not think that this cliche-ridden Sunday story achieved anything by plushy writing, and in fact some of the writing simply confuses the facts involved.”

Eyerly also cited several excerpts from the story that bothered him.

The mighty mite of the money world is on the loose. . . . Interest is a Tom Thumb knight in shining armour, a kind of financial St. George who will slay the dragon of inflation if aroused. . . . The Federal Reserve system can put the economy on a slimming-down diet of money or let it gorge by decreasing or increasing reserves of commercial banks.15

Typically, Eyerly did not lay blame at O’Brien’s feet. Instead, he blamed the editors who assigned the story.

“I assume that this project was born in an editor’s mind and that a number of people bore down on O’Brien and told him to really get down to the level of the common man,” he wrote.

Eyerly’s letter sent managing editors across the country running to Brophy and O’Brien’s defense. E.T. (Ed) Stone, managing editor for the Seattle Post Intelligencer, wrote,

I wish to be on record as being in emphatic disagreement with your comment on the Frank O’Brien story on interest rates. . . . I have never been in Des Moines and it may be that all your readers are of such superior intellect that no simplification of complex subjects that affect us all is necessary.

However, my wife was born in Iowa and, while I think she is reasonably bright, the subject of the effect of interest rates on the prices of things she buys at the grocery and department stores presently is as much beyond her comprehension as would be the effect of the Einstein theory on the weather. . . . We are not editing our papers for readers of The New Yorker. Or, if we are, we'd better go quietly out of business now and not prolong the agony.\textsuperscript{16}

John Day, editor of The Courier Journal and The Louisville Times, wrote, “I don’t believe it’s possible for me to disagree more completely than I do with Frank Eyerly’s stand... I think it is a great shame that newspapers aim their financial pages at a very small group.”

Eyerly responded to all of the letters dealing with his comments on the O’Brien article; letters which displayed a diplomatic tone, but also a barely hidden one-upsmanship. In his response to Stone, Eyerly wrote,

> It would be a curious world if editors were always in agreement, and you and I have been in agreement on so many subjects that I will not hesitate to argue this subject with you. The literary rate in Iowa is the highest in the nation but I do not think that fact has any bearing on this discussion. I agree with Mrs. Stone on the Einstein theory. I haven’t mastered it either... My remarks were not prompted by a feeling that simplification of writing necessarily insults the reader. I do not believe that this particular attempt at simplification came of or succeeded in simplifying the subject for poorly informed people. . . . Let me close, Brother Ed, with one appeal to your scholarly mind: Would you really object to clear, understandable writing in your news columns if it were done consistently as well as the opening pages of The New Yorker each week?\textsuperscript{17}

When the fireworks over his critique subsided, Eyerly decided to send O’Brien’s story to Rudolph Flesch, a readability consultant in New York. Flesch tested the story with his ‘readability formula,’ then reported back to Eyerly.

\textsuperscript{16}Letter from E.T. Stone to Frank Eyerly, 1 June 1953.
\textsuperscript{17}Letter from Frank Eyerly to E.T. Stone, 3 June 1953.
Mr. O'Brien practically reached the "standard" level of "Reading Ease" but fell considerably below the "standard" of human interest. His sentences and vocabulary are adequate for the job of translating economics into layman's language, but he has failed to provide the story with a mental framework that will make it interesting to the average newspaper. . . . You phrased your letter so diplomatically that I don't know whether this reply will please you or not; at any rate I'll be grateful for a line or two on where the battle lines are drawn and who is on what side.  

No doubt that Flesch's letter pleased Eyerly greatly. It must have seemed some small vindication of Eyerly's view that newspapers, and newspapermen, were in the business of educating readers, not pandering to them.

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18Letter from Rudolf Flesch to Frank Eyerly, 23 June 1953.
Eyerly may not have really understood what reporters did, but he was sure of what good editors did.

Where good reporters must be single-minded and focused on their stories to the exclusion of everything else, good editors must be able to put all of the stories that cross their desks into perspective.

A reporter must regard his story as the most important of the day; editors must regard it as just another story until it's compared with everything else that will appear in the next day's paper.

Reporters must have some ability to suffer fools. Editors don't, and Eyerly never did.

Apart from some brief reporting stints for the Des Moines Tribune and the Daily Iowan, Eyerly was an editor for almost the entirety of his professional life. That was the trade he knew, and while reporters could sometimes trick him, Eyerly's editors stood no such chance.

An incident in 1965 perfectly highlighted that contrast. A sanitarian for the state department of agriculture resigned after some improper, if not illegal, politicking in the department by other employees. Reporter Jim Flansburg was assigned to write a Sunday feature about the situation.

In every story The Register ran about the department, a paragraph was included that summarized the situation. Flansburg felt that the paragraph, which
essentially noted that the sanitarian had resigned in protest, was inaccurate, and he
brought his concern to Eyerly’s attention. Eyerly’s response was short.

“He just exploded at me,” Flansburg said. “(He said), ‘we’ve had our lawyers
draw up that paragraph, it’s precisely what we want it to say... put it in, and I don’t
care, just put it in.’ He basically just rammed it through.”

After Eyerly stormed away, Flansburg went to editor John Zug and explained the
situation. Zug directed The Register’s Iowa news gathering operation, and he told
Flansburg to rewrite the paragraph so that it was accurate. Zug said that he would handle
Eyerly.

I don’t know how he handled it, but in any case Eyerly came
roaring out (the day after Flansburg’s story ran with the new paragraph)
and raised hell with the city editors on the city desk, the copy editors on
the copy desk, with the news editor for being so stupid as to let a paragraph
that didn’t make sense go in the papers for several weeks running. A reporter
had written (the original paragraph), and he got a free pass. (Eyerly)
didn’t expect reporters to have that much sense, but goddamit, editors did
and so he just raised hell with them.¹

‘His Principle Management Tool Was Fear.’

Indeed, Eyerly’s temperament had The Register’s editors constantly on edge. He
expected them to be alert, and for them to read The Register as readers, not as editors.

Former Register news editor A. Parker Mize once said that Eyerly’s fury was “as subtle
as a sock on the snoot,” and like “Mount Veuvius unvented.”²

¹Jim Flansburg interview.
²The Iowan, Fall 1997
Flansburg describes the relationship between Eyerly and his editors this way: “It was war.”

When a mistake was made, when a story was not given what Eyerly felt was the proper play, he held nothing back, even if he shared some of the blame. On Sept. 30, 1955, James Dean, the star of “Rebel without a Cause” and “East of Eden,” was killed in a California car crash. His death sent ripples throughout the country, especially among younger movie-goers.

The Register included Dean’s death notice in their September 31 edition, but it ran only a few paragraphs about the story, which it buried in its first edition.

If Eyerly noticed the Dean story during his nightly critique, he said nothing to The Register’s editors, and the death notice was buried in every one of the paper’s subsequent editions.

The calm at the Eyerly breakfast table was broken the next morning by Susan Eyerly shrieking, “Jimmy Dean is dead!” Eyerly then realized the magnitude of the Dean story, and that The Register had misplayed it. He was on the warpath as soon as he entered the office.

(He) went bananas because he realized that this was a huge story for young people, but we’d missed it by sticking it inside. So he comes to the office, and he proceeds to chew the butt out of these guys, you know, and he had let it go through the night before, because he was as dumb as they were.3

Eyerly’s outbursts were painfully public. Usually he vented his frustration in the middle of the newsroom, creating an uncomfortable situation for everyone within hearing distance.

3Gene Raffensperger interview.
One evening a young reporter, Earl Finkler, covered a speech in which he quoted the speaker, whose grammar was horrible, extensively. In fact, the supposedly distinguished speaker sounded so dumb that Register editors gave the story prominent play.

The next morning the speaker, who was still in town, called Frank. He spoke with a mid-Atlantic Kensington accent. And he was furious at having been made a fool of when he obviously wasn’t. So Frank went out into the newsroom and he stood next to Finkler and chewed him out. Then he walked over to the city editor who was sitting two desks away and chewed him out, and he said, ‘I want you to go tell (Finkler) what I just told you because I still don’t think he understands.’ Then he went over and found out who handled the copy on the rim, and chewed him out. He ended it by chewing out the news editor. By the end of it, people were just leaving to go to the nearest bar. But what it did was it impressed upon all of us the necessity to get things right, that we have to check each other, and that everyone is responsible for accuracy. In a sense, it was a great journalism lecture for all of us, young and old, in the newsroom.⁴

Other times Eyerly pulled editors inside his office, where he took a different angle of attack.

Frank liked to sneak up on you. He called some of us into his office one day and said very casually, ‘I don’t suppose you fellows have had a chance to see the survey on what readers like in the paper.’ We told him, ‘Yeah, Frank, we saw it, we really studied it, we looked it over good, and are going to commit it to memory, yes sir, boss.’

Frank said, ‘Tell me what kind of stories get the best readership? Here’s one about college students and here’s another about some sex affair. School and sex, right?’ ‘That’s right, Frank.’

So he picks up the morning paper, turns to a second society section and says, ‘Then why in hell is this story back here in the paper and not page 1?’⁵

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⁴Don Kaul interview.
⁵The Iowan, Fall 1997
Eyerly further tested his editors by reading papers like the Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Star-Times and The New York Times, and lambasted his charges when he found interesting things in those and other papers that The Register had missed.

As a result, his editors studied other nationally renowned papers and "hurried into type any interesting story that we found, hopefully before (he) lowered the boom on us."6

Eyerly also kept his editors scurrying for interesting local news.

You'll sometimes hear editors say, 'Well, it's a dull news day.' Frank's immediate response to anything like that was, 'There is no such thing as a dull news day, it's just dull editors.' In other words, you guys are not turning it, you're not recognizing it, you're not turning over the rocks. It's there, you're just not doing it. If the news from the national wire is no good, then crank out something from someplace else, or turn your local people loose, but there is no dull news day. It's just dull editors.7

And when Eyerly scared people, they stayed scared.

Register columnist Don Kaul recalled being cheeky with a top editor in the late 1970s. The editor said, "You're not afraid of me, are you?" Kaul answered that he wasn't. "Whom are you afraid of?" the editor asked. Kaul answered, "Frank Eyerly." Eyerly had been retired some 10 years by then.

Assistant Editor Dick Spry once mouthed off to Eyerly and spent the rest of his career working from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. on the police beat. Everyone knew Spry's version of the story. Nobody at The Register dared ask Eyerly what had happened.8

Eyerly's praise seldom matched the force of his criticism. The best an editor or reporter might hope for was a brusque comment like, "That was a good job."

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6The Iowan, Fall 1997
7Gene Raffensperger interview.
8"Eyerly's test was tough one to pass," Ames Tribune, May 23, 1997.
Register reporter Gene Raffensperger remembered Eyerly once praised an article he had written. Only Eyerly didn’t directly tell Raffensperger; he told a city editor.

You know, he could have walked over and told me that, but he didn’t. But I think that’s the way he dealt with everyone. I can’t tell you if he had any praise for (editors) or not, but if there was any, I’m sure it was remembered because it would have been so rare.9

And sometimes even in praise, there was a hint of a threat.

One evening, after Eyerly had planned the front page and was headed out the door, he called over to night editor John Karras.

“OK, John,” he said. “You’ve got a good paper. Now don’t fuck it up.”10

Sports editors were generally spared Eyerly’s tough attitude. Sports was one of the few subjects not included in Eyerly’s wide-ranging interests. He saw one University of Iowa football game and enjoyed the pageantry, but thought that the game was about one-third too long. He left the Register’s 50-person sports staff alone to do daily tasks and produce the Sunday Peach section.

He didn’t know anything about sports, absolutely nothing. But what he did was, he trusted the sports people that he had. If they told him something, he didn’t argue with them. Many times he took the idea for his own, as if he had thought it up, when in fact he didn’t know the first thing about it.11

Eyerly also left his Washington bureau alone. The bureau was headed by Dick Wilson and was usually staffed with five reporters.

“The bureau had almost total autonomy,” Register reporter Nick Kotz said. “It was an extreme illustration, but what The Register got out of it was a lot of Pulitzers.”

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9 Gene Raffensperger interview.
10 Gene Raffensperger interview.
11 Gene Raffensperger interview.
The freedom that the Washington bureau enjoyed under Eyerly led to confusion when he retired. Eyerly’s replacement, Ed Heins, took a more active role in its operation and phoned Wilson daily to talk about that day’s stories. Wilson didn’t appreciate what he viewed as Heins’ micro-management.

Heins was calling up night and day, and he had an obsession with railroad accidents. That was probably a good thing to investigate, but Wilson wasn’t used to being called up and, in effect, being micro-managed. One day Heins called up and there had been a railroad accident and Mollenhoff was off making a speech some place, and I was judging a journalism contest and Dick Wilson was left alone in the office to deal with Heins. When (Wilson) found me he lit into me. It was the only time he ever got mad at me. He said, ‘I never want you again to leave me exposed to an editor. I hate editors. When I can’t sleep at night, I count the names of all the stupid editors I know.’

But with the exception of the sports and Washington staffs, every other editor was fair game for Eyerly’s critiques and outbursts.

I don’t know what causes people to do that. I’m sure as a management technique it’s spoken of by people in management as the last thing that you do. And I’m sure he must have known that, but why he did it I don’t know. You hate to see people do that...nobody likes to be a witness to that. We all respected Frank, of course, but most of us had a great deal of respect for the person being ripped apart and it was just silly, there was no reason to do that.

While many editors cowered under Eyerly’s admonitions, he met his match one day in Florence Swihart, who was about Eyerly’s age and The Register’s late-night photo editor for a time. Eyerly was unhappy about a picture and came over to Swihart’s desk and snapped at her.

And by God, she got up and snapped back at him and they stood there.

12Nick Kotz interview.
13Gene Raffensperger interview.
nose to nose, literally nose to nose, yelling at each other in the middle of the newsroom. Nobody had ever done that in plain sight with Frank Eyerly before, and when Frank couldn't do anything with (the argument), he just turned on his heel and stomped off. Everybody wanted to kiss Florence, particularly the editors.  

‘Intimidating, and Yet Awe-Inspiring’

But there was also a soft side to Eyerly when dealing with his employees. Don Kaul started on The Tribune after graduation from The University of Michigan. By Kaul’s own admission, his early career at The Tribune was disastrous.

But Kaul was a character, and wasn’t afraid to challenge authority. Kaul also wasn’t afraid to poke fun at public figures. Eyerly respected that.

I was having terrible problems, partly with my city editor, and fortunately Frank didn’t care that much about The Tribune or I might have been let go. I remember I went into his office after a year of working; I’d had two kids when I was hired and I wasn’t making that much. I went in asked him for a raise - and here is a person who is considering whether he should fire me or not. He looked out the window and said, ‘I certainly like your spirit. I think I’ll give it to you.’

Kaul continued to struggle as a reporter, first at The Tribune, then at The Register, until one day he wrote a funny column that Eyerly liked.

‘That was good, do more of that,’ he said. He belonged to the Simon Legree school of management. He could be absolutely brutal with people, especially subeditors, but there was a soft side to him, too. He was a sucker for a hard-luck story, especially from a drinker. The Register probably had as high a percentage of hard drinkers on the staff in Eyerly’s day as any paper in the country.  

14Don Kaul interview.  
15Don Kaul interview.  
16“When Frank Eyerly ran the Register,” The Des Moines Sunday Register, March 23,
And if Eyerly's means of management were controversial, former Register employees are quick to note that the ends were unquestionably successful.

I would describe him as a man who could be intimidating and yet awe-inspiring. . . . He could cause, and you have to say it this way, he could cause fear and consternation in his staff, particularly among his top editors, and yet I have never seen or heard of anybody that ever worked for him that didn't respect his judgment as a newspaper person and, in fact, most people were in awe of his judgment.17

Just as his hands-off attitude with reporters allowed them to break some of the biggest stories during the mid-century, Eyerly's editorial eye allowed the Register to bring some of the most important stories to the nation's attention, including General Douglass MacArthur's farewell speech at West Point. Eyerly ran the speech on The Register's front page; several national papers followed suit the next day.

He could pick up a bunch of wire copy and the good stories would jump out of that pile. It was just amazing. I thought he had a wonderful sense of what people wanted to read and balanced it with what was important, which was odd, since he wasn't exactly a hermit, but he lived a rather secluded life. I don't think he was ever on the east side of Des Moines except to go to New York.18

Eyerly's news judgment allowed him to enjoy leeway that many managing editors only dream about.

It wasn't rare for Eyerly to phone Ken MacDonald, The Register's executive editor, and arbitrarily increase the size of the paper if he had a late-breaking story that couldn't be held.

17Gene Raffensperger interview.
18Don Kaul interview.
“On a paper like (the Register), it’s an enormous increase in cost...but it wasn’t Eyerly asking for permission, it was Eyerly telling (MacDonald) what he was going to do,” said Flansburg.

MacDonald, the only person that Eyerly answered to, agreed that Eyerly’s news sense overshadowed any concerns about the effects of his temper.

Well, he didn’t suffer fools gladly. Frank was very impatient with incompetence, and he could not stand laziness...but I felt that was fine. He knew what he was doing, and I was glad to have him do it. He was regarded with great respect, because even the people whom he might criticize severely on some occasion recognized what an able editor he was, and they had complete respect for him.19

19Ken MacDonald interview.
Chapter 5 - Managing the Newsroom

Like all newsrooms, The Register was a study in perpetual motion. Every day reporters chased down stories, copy boys and girls raced between the copy desk and the presses, and editors made plans for the next day’s paper and beyond.

It was a noisy place. The clacking of typewriters filled the room and smoke hung heavy in the air.

The floor of the newsroom trembled every time the presses ran. Press room workers folded the previous days’ newspapers into hats to keep the ink out of their hair.

Register reporters did not observe a formal hierarchy. Sometimes reporters would go to Eyerly to discuss a story or problem; other times they would go to a city or news editor.

But there was never any doubt that Eyerly was in charge. He planned Page 1 by himself, and kept his associate editors on a tight leash.

“He micro-managed the editors. I think it’s remarkable that he didn’t schedule their toilet times,” Flansburg said.

But while he may have micro-managed his editors, Eyerly’s management of the newsroom was not so intense. He was not a man burdened by details and took more of a macro approach to his job.
Raffensperger recalled a story that reporter Don Mitchell liked to tell on himself. While humorous, the story demonstrates Eyerly’s difficulty in remembering specifics - like names.

Mitchell claims that he went into the office one day at Frank’s behest and Frank was chatting with him and basically said, ‘Don, you’ve been doing pretty well, and there’s going to be another 10 dollars in your check in another week or so.’ And Mitchell said there was this pause, and Frank looked at him and he said, ‘You are Mitchell, aren’t you?’

Another time Eyerly let a New York Times reporter use The Register newsroom for a few weeks, then forgot who the man was working for.

Frank came walking out into the newsroom and was looking around like he always did and he said to me, ‘Gene, did I hire that fellow over there?’ I said, ‘No, Frank, that guy’s from The New York Times; you gave him permission to work here.’ And he said, ‘Oh yeah, I forgot about that.’ But that’s the way he was. He was like an elephant. He could remember the tiniest things when it came to coverage, and yet when it came to things like names, and so forth, he would kind of blank.

Eyerly would not only blank on names sometimes, he would also forget who was covering what in his excitement to chase down a story.

Something got under Frank’s craw, and when something lighted him up, you might as well just get out of his way because he’d go right out in the newsroom. He wanted something from the courthouse; he wanted something checked or something written. So here’s Walt ‘Shottie’ Shotwell who’d been covering the courthouse for the Register for three years, and Frank’s looking around for a face he can land on and there was Shotwell, so he goes over and he says, ‘Shottie, who is covering the courthouse for us now.’ ‘Well, Frank, I’ve been down there for about three years.’ ‘Oh, yeah, well I knew that. I want you to do something.’ He just came out there single-minded.

\*Gene Raffensperger interview.
\*Gene Raffensperger interview.
Of course he knew Shotwell was covering the courthouse, it just slipped his mind.3

Eyerly also frequently forgot to buy cigarettes, which was a problem since he smoked, by most accounts, between 50-60 Benson & Hedges a day.

"Frank often had a problem of getting his own cigarettes," Raffensperger said. "He was always bumming cigarettes. And to the anger of certain city desk personnel, he would often send young reporters out to get him cigarettes."

Eyerly kept better track of his employees’ salaries. In his office he kept a black book which he would consult when people came in to ask for a raise. Reporter Don Kaul, who said he probably asked for raises more frequently than any other employee in Register history, remembered feeling that his entire financial future was spelled out in that book.

At once point I was making $140 or $160 a week, and that’s just no money. I took the column and I started writing five times a week. And I do this for six months and I don’t get a raise, I didn’t get a desk, I didn’t have a phone, so I felt kind of unstable there. I finally went in and asked him, ‘Frank, it would be nice to have a raise.’ And he said, ‘Well, we don’t want you to lose your connection of identification with the struggling young couples.’ Oh, thanks, that’s what I’m working my ass off for. To be a perpetually struggling young couple.4

Another reporter, Steve Seplow, came to The Register from The New York Times. Eyerly was ecstatic to have Seplow, and was receptive to the reporter when he asked for raise.

Frank pulled out the book and said, ‘Yes, I think we can give you a raise, we’ll just delay this fellow here.’ And he drew a line in the book, presumably through this fellow’s name, making Steve feel like shit, like he

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3Gene Raffensperger interview.
4Don Kaul interview.
was taking money from somebody else.⁵

Although Eyerly sometimes battled with his reporters, especially reporters like Kaul who wasn’t afraid to challenge authority, it wasn’t uncommon for him to treat them to lunch downtown. Reporter Nick Kotz lived a few blocks from Eyerly’s house, and would often go home for dinner, then go back to work. Kotz said he had a standing invitation to drop by Eyerly’s house.

Most holidays saw a young single reporter, or a new editor and his family, at the Eyerly household. Eyerly often took his guests around the house while discussing art, which was one of his greatest passions.

My recollection of most of those evenings were dinner parties for 8 to 10 people. He was interested in young people and in encouraging young people. My wife did a lot of little theater and he was always interested in that. He got us into collecting art, and every visit to their home on 42nd Street involved talking about his newest acquisition. One of things that made him a great editor was his range and interests. Obviously The Register’s coverage of culture, whether it was music or art or theater, had to do with that.⁶

Eyerly had a soft spot for down-on-their-luck reporters. Kaul said The Register probably had the highest percentage of alcoholics of any paper in the country.

After WWII, Eyerly hired a Japanese reporter and a copy editor who had been placed in California internment camps.

“He could be a tyrant, a pushover, or a charming man when he wanted to be,” Kaul said.

⁵Don Kaul interview.
⁶Nick Kotz interview.
Hiring Reporters

Eyerly did not always remember his reporters' names or their beats, but he knew exactly what he wanted when he hired a new writer. Ironically, the first thing he looked for was a college education. Most of his reporters were raised in Iowa, and came from Iowa State or The University of Iowa.

Eyerly liked reporters who had college newspaper experience, but also reporters who had a broad education. To Eyerly, a broad education meant majoring or having interests in subjects other than journalism.

He explained his position in a 1957 memo.

The defects of the journalism schools seem to me to be obvious. The schools, for the most part, have become "communications" and trade schools. Unfortunately they do not, for the most part, do a good job in the trade school area. By piling up courses necessary to a degree in journalism they have shorted the broad liberal curriculum which ought to be the cornerstone in training a newspaperman.7

Eyerly practiced what he preached. Clark Mollenhoff had a law degree. Nick Baldwin had a master's degree in English literature. Food editor Alvina Mattes studied home economics at Iowa State College. Nick Kotz and Gene Raffensperger had served in the military.

A reporter with universal interests, Eyerly felt, was better able to interpret events and explain them to the readers. And educating readers was always one of Eyerly's goals.

To me it is self-apparent that young men and women who are going into the field of communications ought to be schooled in the humanities,

7Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register staff, 10 April 1957.
English literature, the social and physical sciences and the other components of the great traditions of the human race. The three smartest Washington correspondents I know were educated respectively for chemical engineering, the teaching of English literature and the practice of law. The newspaperman I know who best understood atomic energy during the formative years of Hiroshima’s inheritance was the product of a small town high school and a middle western university where, by compulsion, he had studied more mathematics and physics than we consider necessary today.

One of Eyerly’s fellow editors put it his way. “We want liberal arts graduates because we can teach them journalism but we cannot teach them the liberal arts.”

‘I Think You Need To Get Down There To Drake and Register’

Eyerly’s belief in a college education did not stop with his reporters and editors. His secretary, Julie Powell, started working for him when she was 25. Powell was recommended to Eyerly by Hugo Schultz, a Newton attorney who was one of Eyerly’s childhood friends. Powell had been Schultz’s secretary.

Eyerly hired Powell on the condition that she finish college. She had already taken two years of classes at Grandview College, and then gotten married and had two children.

By the time she started working for Eyerly, Powell was a single mother and she had doubts about whether she would ever get a college degree. But when fall registration at Drake University began, Eyerly called Powell into his office.

He called me in and in his deep, resonant voice said, ‘Julie, are you enrolled in school this fall?’ And I said, ‘No, I don’t know how I can do that. I can’t afford to go to school, I don’t have enough time with the kids as it is, and

8Memorandum from Frank Eyerly to Register staff, 10 April 1957.
9“The Press.” Speech by Frank Eyerly at the University of Nebraska, 27 Aug. 1963.
I don’t see how I can do it.’ There was a long pause and then he said, ‘I will give you a raise, you can have one day off during the week, you can have your children down here with you on Saturday. I think you need to get over there to Drake and get registered.’ And that’s just how it was. It was something that I wanted to do, and he just created that path.10

Powell graduated with honors and was inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa society. Eyerly bought her a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Powell became one of Eyerly’s confidants on The Register. One young reporter, Bob Kissler, suffered at times from a lack of confidence. Eyerly made sure he gave Kissler feedback on his stories. Eyerly also had Powell read the stories and got her opinion.

“And I just saw lots of that kind of mentoring going on,” Powell said. “Kissler was a really fine storyteller and reporter, and Frank knew it was just a matter of giving him lots of response.”

Eyerly also let Powell know how much he appreciated her work, and perhaps paid her the ultimate compliment. He let her drive up his driveway.

It wasn’t long before I knew Frank didn’t drive. I was driving a Nash Rambler that I’d gotten for $75 and it was a great little car that got me to work. And one night Frank needed a ride and I told him that he’d have to hold the sheet metal down on the floor because it flapped and clattered in the wind. He knew there were ways he could help me, but he never made me feel poor. He just rode along in the Nash Rambler like it was a Chrysler, holding the floorboards down. I loved it. When I drove him home, he would stand at the top of the driveway and caution me, as I was backing out, and it wasn’t long before I had that driveway down.11

10 Julie Powell, interviewed by author, 25 March 1998, Des Moines, Iowa.
11 Julie Powell interview.
Beating the Associated Press and Television

For the most part, The Register had almost no competition in Iowa on a statewide level. Gardner Cowles, Sr., had bought a number of competing papers around the state during the early part of the century and incorporated them into The Register and Tribune Co.

The Register was read in 3 out of 5 homes across the state. Its Sunday circulation topped 500,000, and the paper had the largest mail subscription list in the United States.

The Register did, however, face some competition for statewide stories; notably the AP and television. Eyerly made it a point to keep this competition at bay.

The Associated Press kept an office on the fifth floor of The Register and Tribune building. Register and Tribune reporters made three copies of every story that they wrote. One copy went to the AP.

The exception was when a reporter had an exclusive story. Eyerly prohibited the release of these types of stories to the AP, which would usually rewrite the story and put it on the wire. Often, the television news would then take the story from the wire or The Register's first edition.

And it didn't necessarily stop there. If the AP put a breaking story on the wire, morning dailies all across Iowa would put it in their morning editions.

“So here they are scooping you on your own damn story,” Raffensperger said.

Eyerly took pains to ensure that didn't happen.

The Register would go to a great extent, and extremes at times, to keep stories away from the AP. Frank devised a rule, a thing called dummying the story. We'd take the paper and put it together, and put in a dummy story
and run off 150 copies downstairs and put those out on the machine. That’s what the TV guys would steal. They’d grab that paper. When that was done, (Frank) would stop the press and put in the good story in there.12

On other occasions Eyerly made extensive use of the AP. When Nick Kotz began his series of stories on dirty meat that eventually led to a Pulitzer Prize, Eyerly made sure that the AP got every single Kotz story, and that those stories were copywrited to The Register.

Kotz’s stories were then assured of a wide release, which was one of the requirements for the Pulitzer Prize.

When you’re in Washington, and your stuff doesn’t appear in Washington, and advancing the story depends on people seeing it - that can become very difficult. Anybody other than The Wall Street Journal, New York Times or Washington Post has trouble getting heard in Washington. Eyerly would take my stories to the AP editor, copyright them and get them on the national wire. Not too many editors were clever enough or understood the news dynamic to do that. My stories would appear in Des Moines and the same morning they might appear in Washington because he got them to move the story back to Washington.13

‘I’m Hot On the Trail Of the Blunderer’

Eyerly not only went out of his way for reporters, and but he also went to great lengths for Register subscribers. If one Iowa county was holding a special election or referendum, Eyerly wouldn’t hesitate to send reporters to the county and print a special section. He expected such efforts to proceed flawlessly, which was not always the case.

12Gene Raffensperger interview.
13Nick Kotz interview.
Raffensperger was once sent to cover a special election in the town of Clinton.

Raffensperger stayed up all night covering the election, and then phoned the results and his story to The Register's news desk.

The story was then printed in a special section just for Clinton subscribers.

However, a mistake was made in the mail room, and when Raffensperger woke up the next morning in Clinton and looked at his paper, there was no election story. The special edition had ended up in Cherokee. The locals were unhappy. Eyerly was almost in an apoplectic rage.

When Frank found out about that, he was just furious that we'd worked on it for so long. I got a letter from him the next day that said, 'I'm hot on the trail of the blunderers.' I can just see him baying down the trail with some guy running out there. Frank goes hot on the trail. He was going to find out who did that, and by god have his ass.\(^{14}\)

\[\text{‘The Greatest Show On Earth’}\]

About 4:00 p.m., reporters would start pitching page 1 stories to news editor John Zug. Most reporters had one or two stories they'd been working on all day; George Mills, who covered the Iowa legislature and local politics, usually had five or six.

The greatest show on earth was George Mills presenting his story options. I would work hard on one story all day and say this is the best story that I can come up with, but a daily ritual would be Mills standing in front of Zug's desk and trying out his stories. And he would wait and see which one got the biggest rise, then go get the rest of the story.\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\)Gene Raffensperger interview.

\(^{15}\)Nick Kotz interview.
Although reporters pitched their stories to Zug, Eyerly made the final decision about which stories made page 1 when he came out of his office at about 4:30. He also wrote many of the page 1 headlines, and did not let space limitations affect how the headline read.

In 1968, during the peak of Vietnam protests on college campuses, students staged a rally at the University of Iowa. The National Guard arrived on the campus to keep control of the situation; however, several arrests were made during the day.

The situation was The Register's lead page 1 story, but Register editors were having a difficult time coming up with a headline for the banner which ran across the top of the paper every day. Eyerly solved that problem.

I think when he really wanted something he would dictate those headlines himself, he'd make it work. . . . So these guys were struggling, asking 'What are we going to do, what are we going to say?' And you know what Frank wrote? 'BAD DAY AT IOWA CITY.' Perfect, you couldn't have got a better one. You bet it was a bad day. And it fit, people picked up the paper and said, 'By God, that's right you know. Bad day at Iowa City.' Sure as hell was.16

One of Eyerly's traits was to unleash an avalanche of coverage on subjects that he felt Iowans cared about. In 1965 the Iowa Legislature passed a law that required Amish children to attend public schools. The law sparked debate all over the state, and in typical form, Eyerly had numerous reporters and photographers covering the topic.

One Friday morning a Register photographer snapped a picture of truant Amish children being chased by public school officials. The pictures captured the children just before they disappeared into a cornfield.

It was just a sensational picture and it ran on a Saturday morning. I think it got in all editions. But Frank loved that picture so much that he ran it

16Gene Raffensperger interview.
again on Sunday. The headline over the picture ran, 'GREAT PICTURE IS REPRINTED.' He didn’t get cute, he just said what it was. . . . The excuse he had was a good one, and that is the Sunday paper had subscribers that were not subscribers to the daily paper, and so that was their first chance to see it. While somebody else would pick up the paper and say, ‘Well, shit, I’ve seen that picture before,’ well, so what, there were a lot of people who didn’t see it.17

In 1936, Edward VIII abdicated the British throne for his lover, Wallis Simpson. Eyerly ran the king’s quote across the top of the front page.

I HAVE FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CARRY THE HEAVY BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY AND TO DISCHARGE MY DUTIES AS KING AS I WOULD WISH TO DO WITHOUT THE HELP AND SUPPORT OF THE WOMAN I LOVE

“Few other papers displayed that famed love story so well,” Mills said. “Eyerly had the ability to pack a major story into a few emotional headlines.”

‘A Strong Urge To Vomit’

Sometimes readers felt that Eyerly’s headlines were over the top, as when President Lyndon Johnson’s daughter became engaged to a Marine. The Register ran the following two headlines on successive days: “LYNDA TO MARRY MARINE” and “HOW CHUCK WON LYNDA.” The stories detailed their romance.

One Waterloo writer said the headlines gave him “a strong urge to vomit.”

Another writer complained, “There should be certain minimum standards below which you would not fall just to sell an additional unit.”

17Gene Raffensperger interview.
Eyerly responded to most letters he received, usually in a terse one paragraph note in which he wrote, “You may very well be right,” after summarizing the reader’s complaint.

Other times Eyerly was more loquacious in his response to complaints, but he usually retained a hint of tongue-in-cheek humor. He told the Waterloo writer,

Many newspaper readers are depressed by the world situation, the dilemma in Vietnam and the civil unrest and the strikes at home. These readers tell us that surely there is some happy news in America today. Make no mistake, the readers of The Register and Tribune believe in love and romance. Personally, I find it delightful to read the President’s daughter is engaged to a splendid young man who is serving his country. I am grateful for your views.18

Eyerly also took great pleasure in poking fun at New York City, perhaps to make Iowans feel happy about where they lived. When a fire erupted in a New York Theater, The Register ran the story on the front page with the headline, “FIRE EMPTIES THEATER WHERE MUSIC MAN IS PLAYING IN NEW YORK CITY.”

Stories about crime and corruption in New York frequently ran on The Register’s front page.

He loved portraying the Big Apple as the quintessential wicked city, at once glitteringly attractive and repulsive. There was seldom a mugging in Central Park in those years that didn’t make it to the front page of The Register; a New York scandal that didn’t get prominent display. He was probably right about Iowans’ interest in those stories. He was usually right about what Iowans wanted to read.19

18“Friend of the Doves.”
19“When Frank Eyerly ran the Register.”
Eyerly’s greatest strength was his ability to recognize news that would interest readers. He could find it buried in the middle of The Register’s front section during his nightly critiques of the first edition; he could spot it while leafing through endless pages of wire copy.

Eyerly’s goal was to educate readers, but he also thought that a newspaper should entertain and he wasn’t shy about giving good play to controversial subjects.

“I think Frank deliberately tried to incite people in Iowa about certain things,” Register reporter Gene Raffensperger said. “He would run the most outrageous goddamned cleavage shots that you can’t believe it. Stuff that would never get in the paper now, and Frank would run those all the time.”

Jail breaks, sex scandals and art frauds had the same chance to get on Eyerly’s front page as political and international developments did.

Reporter David Gartner described Eyerly’s journalism this way:

“The reader picks up the paper, looks at it and says, ‘They wouldn’t print that - my God! They did.’”

‘News Is the Authentication of Human Experience’

When asked, “What is news?” Eyerly had a standard response. “News is the authentication of human experience.”
Eyerly's response was a paraphrase of John Dewey's definition that "news is something that interrupts the customary course of events or, in simple words, the unexpected or sometimes the expected but only when it comes to pass."

News is what a reader can relate to. A consumer news story dealing with the danger of poison in lipstick would be of little interest to an Arizona sheep herder. It would be of intense interest to almost all women readers. Automobile fatalities are a daily occurrence. Most readers drive cars, but there is little evidence that they are shaken by highway fatalities. But a highway fatality involving two Indiana students driving home for a weekend would have intense readership among the parents of all college students.¹

Eyerly was also fond of his friend Bob Shand's definition of news and a newspaper's purpose: "A newspaper exists to print the news and raise hell."

Eyerly expanded on his view of news in numerous speeches, including a 1963 talk that contained possibly the longest sentence Eyerly ever wrote.

The newspaper's purpose is to inform, instruct, entertain and inspire. A newspaper is a locally oriented visual product that provides the only generally available medium recording events of interest to people in the community. The deaths, the births, the weddings, the changes in the school curriculum, the calendar of sports events, the real estate transactions, the explanation as to why the power plant was closed by a storm thereby suspending the 10 p.m. broadcast, the high school honor role citations, the explanation of a football coach's libel suit against a national magazine, the plans for conducting tomorrow's election, the hours at which the polls open and close, the results of yesterday's election when the newspaper is the only medium that provides you with election results precinct by precinct or state by state in a format which you can study, compare, or preserve, the explanation of what the common market is, the sociological background to an English crisis generated in a bawdy house, the forthright reporting that touches off a sensational probe of labor racketeering, the inspired reporting that reveals corporation recklessness in marketing products that are dangerous to the public's health, the penetrating and uninhibited reporting that makes it possible for voters to assess their political views all the way from the township trustees to the president of the United States, the analytical reporting that that helps

¹Speech given by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967. In addition to serving as the Register and Tribune's managing editor, Eyerly also served as president of the Associated Press Managing Editors and was a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.
democratic people make decisions in debates that may affect the very survival of the human race, all these and a thousand other topics reflect the raw materials that constitute newspaper content.²

Perhaps no story better illustrates Eyerly's definition of news as the authentication of the human experience than his decision in publish Joan Liffring's pictures in 1951.

Liffring was a features writer and photographer for the Cedar Rapids Gazette when she became pregnant with her first child. The newspaper told her to quit her job.

She was determined to keep working, however, and photographed the birth of her son Artie on April 6, 1951.

Liffring said the photo essay was designed to celebrate birth at a time when many women dreaded the experience. However, several women's magazines rejected the collection of pictures as too graphic for publication.

Liffring brought the pictures to Eyerly, who printed them in The Register's Sunday edition. The pictures were then printed in Life magazine. After that, offers for Liffring poured in, and she went on to enjoy a successful freelance career.

The Critiques

Perhaps the best insight into Eyerly's vision of a newspaper can be found in his critiques of The Register and its competition. Eyerly believed that newspapers should serve four basic functions, which he outlined in a 1961 letter.

²"The Press."
Competence of Local Reporting and Editing: A newspaper need not be big to be well-written and edited, and to display qualities of moral strength, perceptiveness to the local scene, hone objectivity on local news, and the sense of compassion that marks many good newspapers.

Completeness of National and International Coverage: A newspaper need not be large to carry a “complete” report daily on the world about us.

Quality of News Presentation and Projection: This point concerns two different but related areas. Presentation has to do with use of type, white space and picture cropping...The subject of ‘projection’ is somewhat different. Here you are concerned with the weighting of the news or the assessment of news values. On this question any group of competent editors will come to blows. One school is concerned with history and how page 1 will look 25 years hence. I was reared in a different tradition. I want my papers to look good to historians 25 years hence and I want all of the important news in the paper, but I am a lot more concerned with tomorrow morning’s reception of the news in Iowa, the readability or interest that my immediate audience will respond to.

The Integrity of a Newspaper: There is no need to write a flatulent paragraph on this point.3

Eyerly constantly applied these principles to The Register, which he and Ken MacDonald critiqued on a regular basis. Eyerly examined everything from headlines to typography in an attempt to keep The Register among the nation’s elite papers. His mission was always to educate his readers.

‘The Quick, Simple Description Of a Situation Is the Most Effective Headline’

Eyerly kept a critical eye on all of his editors, starting with those who read copy and wrote headlines. Eyerly believed that an accurate headline was as important as the accuracy of Register stories.

3Letter from Frank Eyerly to John Colburn, 12 April 1961.
It was a common Eyerly trait to critique the day’s efforts, and then release a report detailing his findings that every editor was required to read and initial. In 1949 he sent out this memo.

We have had several stories in headlines in some editions concerning the filibuster that are so far afield from the realities involved that I think they should be noted. In a mail edition headline the other night, we said GOP-DIXIE FILIBUSTER PROPOSAL REJECTED. This headline apparently was based on a sentence in the story, to the effect that administration leaders proposed to fight a proposal to end the 15-day old senate filibuster. Another headline in one edition quoted Lucas as accusing the GOP of abject surrender in the proposal that was engineered by a group of Democrats and Republicans. The same night we headlined this “rejection” of the filibuster proposal, a majority of the senate indicated clearly their acceptance of the proposal.\(^4\)

In the same memo, Eyerly showed his ability to pull stories that would interest readers out of the middle of the paper.

I considered the two top heads in the mail editions of Thursday morning excessive coverage on the filibuster cover-up. It is a rare news situation that justifies two columns of type on page one. An intensely interesting story that was carried inside the paper was the account of the British shopping rush after eight years of rationing. Any Iowa woman who has been hectored by shopping problems for several years would find this story much more newsworthy than the two top heads on the filibuster.\(^5\)

It is a likely bet that none of the editors asked Eyerly why he didn’t make the change himself during his nightly critique of the paper.

Eyerly summed up the critique with headline writing hints; hints that routinely appeared in his critiques.

As a general thing the quick, simple description of a situation is the most effective headline. Many times a copy reader will frame a good headline by asking himself what he would say orally if his wife said to him: ‘What’s

\(^4\)Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register editors, 17 March 1949.
\(^5\)Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register editors, 17 March 1949.
the story about?" Usually articulate people will state a thing most effectively when they blurt out a sentence of description. 6

Eyerly’s memos were usually diplomatic in tone, a far cry from his on-the-phone critiques of the desk.

I remember once my friend John Karras was in the slot. Frank called and he said, ‘John, who’s working copy tonight?’ And Karras knew, oh shit, something bad’s going to happen here. And Karras said, ‘Well, (editor) Jay Homing’s kid is, Frank.’ And Frank said, ‘Well, I suppose if Jay Homing’s kid brought you a piece of toilet paper you’d put that in the paper too, wouldn’t you.’ 7

In his own headline writing Eyerly showed a gift for flair. He encouraged his copy readers to do likewise, but only if the situation called for it, and only if the headline accurately advanced the story that would follow.

In March 1950 The Register geared up to cover a sensational murder trial in Iowa City. A jolted lover had killed his cheating girlfriend at the University of Iowa. Eyerly dispatched a memo to his editors and reporters warning that the story would need no embellishment from The Register or Tribune.

I anticipate that substantial amounts of the testimony in the case will be of an unprintable nature and I think the editors should be forewarned... Testimony of the type I anticipate will necessarily have to be briefed or skeletonized because I do not want to have the newspapers walking in the footsteps of the old New York Pornographic... The thing I do not want done in either paper is the printing of such headlines as BARES LOVE TRYSTS IN ROOMING HOUSE or EROTIC CAMPUS LIFE TOLD IN TRIAL. 8

Eyerly also kept an eye on The Register’s graphics editors. Eyerly incorporated the use of maps in The Register masterfully during WWII. He never forgot that maps can

6Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register editors, 17 March 1949.
7Don Kaul interview.
8Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register and Tribune editors, 8 March 1950.
bring a reader information in a fraction of the time words can, but only if they are drawn correctly.

In July 1950, Eyerly chastised his staff for failing to match a map with the news of the day during the Korean War.

For a number of years we have had an outstanding reputation among American newspapers for the quality of our war maps. I do not intend that we shall lose our position in this field and I want everyone concerned with the editorial production of the papers to give the map problem some serious thought. This morning’s map had none of the important news of the day in the captions, there was no coverage of the destruction of large numbers of North Korean tanks...there was a single stereotyped use of “Reds” in each of the four boxes on the page. These maps cannot be prepared efficiently by a hasty reading of bulletins 30 minutes before preparation of the map starts. Everyone concerned with map production should be reading the news around the clock... The Register’s war map and The Tribune’s war map each day should be predicated on a 24-hour around-the-clock treatment of the highlights of the news.9

Eyerly's Vision Of The Register

Eyerly believed that reporting news was not the only function of The Register and Tribune. He also believed that newspapers should strive to help people make sense of their world, and to make their lives easier.

“The newspaper's purpose is to inform, instruct, entertain and inspire,” Eyerly said in 1963. Starting in 1946 The Register and Tribune ran columns about interior decorating, furniture buying and the other problems of interest to households.

One phenomena of the post-war world which has been reported in the news columns widely has been the increasing rate of marriage and, sadly enough, the decreasing availability of housing for young married couples. This is a phase of Iowa living that was tailor-made for The Register and

9Memo from Frank Eyerly to Register editors, 11 July 1950.
Tribune’s circulation structure and editorial capacities.\textsuperscript{10}

The Register regularly featured a food column with recipes and updates on what was available in the local markets, and the condition and pricing of fruit and vegetables in season.

“Food is one of the most important items in the budget of every household,” Eyerly told his advertising department, “and food and cooking represent about the highest readership of anything that appears on the feature pages of our newspapers.”

The Register printed news columns about fashion, refrigerators and fishing tackle. It published a weekly farm magazine, headed by J.S. Russell, that was “literally intended as a stepladder for a farmer to show him how to do things better on the basis of what another farmer does.”

Eyerly also placed great importance on entertainment. Again, his concern was for his readers’ time, especially as the popularity of television rose, a rise that was not matched by the quality of programming.

I do not know how most of you feel about television but I am sure that there are many people in this room with varying tastes who allocate a certain amount of time each week to watching television. . . . There are many movies on TV each week, a few very good, some good, most of them horrible.

How can you possibly allocate your time without the guidance of honest TV previews and criticism? If the program is good or if it is questionable, surely you turn to the autopsy in your newspaper to verify your prejudices or to build a case for punching one of our reviewers in the nose.\textsuperscript{11}

The Register’s entertainment coverage didn’t stop with television. Reviewers were sent around the country to report on new art exhibits. Eyerly’s reasoning was

\textsuperscript{10}Speech by Frank Eyerly to Register advertising department, 1960.

\textsuperscript{11}Speech by Frank Eyerly to the Advertising Club of Des Moines, 13 March 1956.
simple. The Des Moines Art Center had 56,000 yearly visitors. The Community Theater had about 6,000 members. Many Iowans traveled to New York for the theater.

“You must do these things because readers do them,” Eyerly said.

The Soft News

With Eyerly’s team of reporters, The Register never had to worry about breaking hard news. But Eyerly’s interests did not stop with hard news. He also knew, as he told the Waterloo writer who protested the Lynda Johnson stories, that Register and Tribune readers expected to be entertained when they unbundled their papers in the morning.

Eyerly’s aversion to filling page 1 with only hard news is explained in a 1963 critique of The Portland (Maine) Sunday Telegram.

A reader certainly knows he is in Maine when he looks at this page one. I want to applaud your energy in contriving your own St. Patrick’s Day picture. . . . (but) a conversation piece, a human interest story, anything to make a wife and husband talk at the breakfast table would have helped your page one.12

Eyerly loved the human interest story, whether it came from the field of politics, entertainment or the plains of Iowa.

In 1960, The Register started a series called ‘Iowans of the Western Slope.’ The series, written by George Shane and photographed by Arnie Gore, profiled various western Iowans and their communities. Eyerly introduced the series in a speech to his circulation department.

We are investing all of this effort and expense in this series because we believe the articles will have a high readership in eastern Iowa and the rest of the state. . . . one of the important developments of contemporary psychology and sociology is the knowledge that men and women like to be identified with each other; in short, they enjoy the spiritual strength that comes from togetherness. This kind of group sense and loyalty often is translated into economic determination.

The people of western Iowa in many ways have a close identity with each other. The aim of this series is to further strengthen this group feeling and to point this group toward The Sunday Register.13

Eyerly’s interest in women did not stop at publishing eyebrow-raising cleavage pictures. When a young women from Trumbel, Iowa, was named Miss Universe Eyerly unleashed an avalanche of coverage.

Frank just went bananas. We must have written 400 stories on that. Another one we had was an actress named Jean Seberg, who was from Marshalltown and was selected for a role in Hollywood in the Joan of Arc movie. They had a big talent search and they picked her. She was a high school girl from Marshalltown for God sake. . . . Later she got married up there in Marshalltown to a Frenchman and god, you know, Frank just went crazy on that.14

Eyerly also looked for interesting stories occurring around the nation. In February 1956 The Tribune ran a series on Robert Stroud, a two-time murderer who, at that time, had been in solitary confinement longer than any other person in United States’ history.

Although Stroud had only a third grade education, he made himself into a scientist, a writer, a bacteriologist and authority on the disease of birds.

13 Talk by Frank Eyerly to Register advertising department, 1960.
14 Gene Raffensperger interview.
That same year The Tribune ran a series about a young Colorado housewife who recalled a previous existence in 19th-century Ireland under hypnosis. The woman named events, places and people she had known in Belfast 100 years earlier.

"I cannot promise you that everyone who reads the Bridey Murphey story will believe it," Eyerly told his circulation department, "but I can promise you that no two people can read the story without engaging in violent dispute and argument about the plausibility of the series."

Eyerly also knew his readers were fascinated by Hollywood, and filled The Register with news about the stars.

"He was nuts about Liz Taylor and Marilyn Monroe," Raffensperger said.

One year while lecturing at the American Press Institute, Eyerly was challenged by one editor for carrying an eight-column banner headline in The Register about Elizabeth Taylor’s latest sexual scandal.

"You aren’t doing anything but making an outright pitch for readership," the editor said.

Eyerly later wrote, "I believe his criticism provides his own response, the end objective of the newspaper or any communication media, is communications...There is no substitute for readership."\footnote{Speech given by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.}

In January 1957 The Register ran a series about the breakup of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. The series coincided with Lewis’ first solo appearance on television the same month, and scooped Look Magazine which ran a similar feature later that year.
Stories like these complemented other Register stories that year, stories that included Richard Wilson's coverage of the NATO conference in Paris, Clark Mollenhoff's coverage of the Teamster and other union hearings, Nick Lamberto's series on the Air Force, Ben McGrane's coverage of the Master's in Augusta, and George Mill's reporting on people of normal intelligence being kept in a mental health hospital for decades.

"He put things in the paper, or ordered things into the paper, or guided things into the paper that didn't really look like they would be of interest to Iowa readers, but they were," Raffensperger said.
While he loved sending memos to various departments of The Register and Tribune, Eyerly did not limit his critiques to The Register. Eyerly also kept his finger on the pulse of journalism across the United States, and while he rarely agreed with the professional newspaper critiques, Eyerly found plenty to criticize.

But he also found plenty to applaud about journalism, and shared his views in speeches that he made across the country. Whether he was talking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in New York or to journalism students in Indiana, Eyerly never hid appreciation for what he considered to be a profession of the highest calling.

On Aug. 27, 1963, Eyerly gave the Kappa Tau Alpha Lecture at the University of Nebraska. The speech was simply titled “The Press,” and was one of the finest of Eyerly’s career.

The Nebraska address had two themes which Eyerly often returned to in his other speeches. He summed them up in his opening statement.

My thesis tonight is that newspapers are better than ever and if they aren’t, it’s the fault of the editors and the journalism educators. A secondary theme is that the newspapers have many shortcomings but they are not the shortcomings the critics usually discuss.1

In the Nebraska speech, Eyerly noted the improvements in newspaper layout with the invention of taped linotype composition, argued that young reporters were men and

1“The Press.”
women of “straitlaced and dogmatic convictions,” and that television would never match the sheer scope of coverage that newspapers provided.

To prove that point, Eyerly quoted Chet Huntley and Walter Cronkite, both of whom had discussed the role of newspapers in 1963 during New York’s newspaper strike.

“Trying to fill in for the missing newspapers has taught TV that only the newspapers themselves can do that job,” Huntley said. “Television and radio journalism cannot and should not attempt to deal with the day’s complete budget of information.”

Cronkite cited a hypothetical example in which two men are locked inside a windowless room for a year. One receives a newspaper every day, the other a daily television broadcast.

“At the end of that time,” Cronkite said, “the guy who had been watching television would come out with a strange idea of what had happened in the world.”

The Critics

Eyerly held most newspaper critics in barely-disguised contempt, and dismissed the traditional complaints about journalism that centered on commonly cited beliefs. Critics of newspapers often complained that editors were more in tune with the jet-set than their average readers; that the proliferation of chains like Scripps and Hearst were damaging newspapers; and that America was a one-party press.

Eyerly did not share any of these views. He argued that despite the growth of newspaper chains, newspaper readers were better off in the 1950s than they had been at the turn of the century.

He felt that most newspapers reported fairly, if inadequately, on political campaigns, and in a January 1960 speech noted, "the most prejudiced coverage I could find was in a staunch Democratic daily in a city containing several competing newspapers."

Eyerly addressed other criticisms of newspapers in that speech.

Many critics focus on the wrong things, in my opinion. They worry too much about what is printed in the papers; they would make a better case if they would concentrate on what is not printed.

A favorite whipping boy is the preoccupation of the press with status. In the 1920s William Allen White authored a frequently quoted commentary which said in effect that too many editors get their opinions at the country club... The assessment is unimportant today. Editors and publishers on the whole have achieved success and status and they are more likely to be cocky than sympathetic when criticized by advertisers.

Another sophisticated critic, the late Oswald Garrison Villard, in about the same period recalled the grandeur of his grandfather and recalled that William Lloyd Garrison had slept on the floor of The Liberator press room in order to keep the torch of a free press blazing in America. Villard was sure editors would do this again. I take that observation with some reservations. I am not sure that under the union rules it would be permissible for an editor to sleep on the floor, and for my part, I do not want to do it.4

In 1962 Eyerly contested another criticism of newspapers that drove him crazy; namely that the majority of papers in the United States were inadequate. He mocked the editorial groups who, he assumed, reached this conclusion by reading a survey of one newspaper and comparing it with 25 other papers published the same day.

4Speech by Frank Eyerly at the Des Moines Workshop, 13 June 1960.
"Such scatterbrained research would be thrown out by anyone schooled in the discipline of medicine or law," Eyerly said.

In the last three years I have heard a half-dozen of my colleagues, smart, knowledgeable, competent practitioners, sit on television panels and accept without question the comment of some woolly-headed moderator to the effect that only 10 percent of the daily papers in America are good papers and continue the discussion in terms that apparently would exclude 90 percent of the papers from consideration. Of course, the fact is that there is no one in this calling, no one on the campus, and not even the circulation director of Editor and Publisher magazine, who is acquainted with 10 percent of the newspapers in the country. Ten percent of the American daily press would be 180 newspapers, and I have yet to see a man who has read 180 daily newspapers for a long enough period to evaluate them.5

Strengths

Far from believing that most newspapers were shoddy wastes of paper, Eyerly contended that local newspapers offered their communities invaluable services that national papers would never be in a position to provide.

While The New York Times, Washington Post and, for that matter, The Des Moines Register provided detailed coverage of national and international news, Eyerly realized that only local papers could print a listing of births and deaths, provide insight to the town’s political scene or capture the flavor of the cities they serviced.

In our society there are few occupations untouched by government. The farmer lives in part on a federal subsidy; the middle men chisel in on the same subsidy; the doctor studies in state-supported schools and practices in public-financed hospitals, the laboring man’s union has become an almost continuing part-time avocation of government... You can feel about this relationship of man and the state as you please, but the fact remains that man needs a public defender to represent him. Only the daily newspaper is in a

5: "The Press."
position to police government by reporting the activities of government which directly affect the individual.⁶

Eyerly also believed that the press deserved credit for an era of self-examination that had developed by the mid-century, an examination that Eyerly felt was lacking in the editors who preceded his generation.

Twenty-five years ago, when I attended my first national meeting of managing editors (1935), I was impressed by the confident and stubborn manner in which my older colleagues rebuffed any attempt at self-criticism.

Last year if you would examine the convention program...you would suspect that there was little being well done by any of the membership.⁷

Belated Discovery

Eyerly believed most of America’s newspapers had value, but he also acknowledged that they all had weaknesses.

“The only print media that is complete is the telephone directory and the city directory,” he said in 1962.

Most of the fault, Eyerly believed, lay with shortsighted editors. One of the greatest problems in the press was what Eyerly called belated discovery.

Slow to understand their own times, they edit next week’s newspapers with their eyes firmly focused on last month’s events. They prattle on about the younger generation, but they rarely take the time to explore the younger generation. They cast greedy eyes on the reader potential of a situation they hear discussed in a bar while blandly ignoring what goes on in their own backyard; they are fascinated by the implications of birth control in Asia but singularly avoid coming to grips with controversy in their own suburbs.⁸

⁶Speech by Frank Eyerly at the Des Moines Workshop, 13 June 1960.
⁷Speech by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.
⁸“The Promise of Daily Journalism.” Speech by Frank Eyerly at the University of Michigan, 12 May 1960.
In a 1960 speech given at the University of Michigan, Eyerly cited Sputnik as an example of belated discovery. The Russian rocket raised concerns about American students’ proficiency in math and science, and brought the nation’s educational system as a whole to the forefront of public discussion.

Eyerly claimed that there had been rumblings in the populace about American schools for many years prior to Sputnik, and that it shouldn’t have taken such a dramatic event to put education on the nation’s newspaper’s front pages.

Surely, any editor who had an awareness of his own community should have known that the public school curriculum had been undergoing change for three decades, in part as a result of the work of John Dewey at Teachers College. . . . Sometimes the story was not easily recognized. It turned up in the news columns when a bullheaded parent stood on his feet at a P.T.A. meeting and screamed about the inadequacy of the symbols on his son’s report card. In every school district in America the story had been sleeping. So far as I can recall, there was little enthusiasm among my colleagues for coverage of education until that eventful autumn day when the Russians launched Sputnik.

I spend considerable time with editors and I must confess that it was stimulating and exciting when friends of mine, whose concern with mathematics had been limited to the formula for properly building a dry martini, suddenly decided to erect a barricade and battle for the higher learning in their news columns.9

Eyerly believed another belated discovery by editors was the reexamination of American life and values. Eyerly was a fan of Thorstein Veblen, whose “The Theory of the Leisure Class” challenged the economic and social values of America at the turn of the century. Eyerly felt that the difficulty editors had in dealing with the civil unrest of the 1960s stemmed in some part from an ignorance of Veblen’s teachings.

9Speech by Frank Eyerly at the Des Moines Workshop, 13 June 1960.
The really important news story of your generation is the reexamination of American life and values. It relates to the immediate object of debate in America, the question of defense and survival. Veblen was the first American to challenge the economic and social values of the American experiment. He anticipated by the "Status Seekers" by half a century. This is no news on campus. It is only news in the newsroom. You would find it difficult to find an editorial meeting today where some editor would not polish off a lively discussion with some reference to Madison Ave., as thought the shoddy and superficial in American life had only been discovered in the 1950s.  

And their slow reaction to the teachings and reaction to Sigmund Freud in the United States, Eyerly believed, provided more evidence that many editors were out of touch with their world.

In many states of the Union the state mental hospitals are a disgrace. In most states, the budget for supporting these hospitals is second only to appropriations for highways and schooling. . . . More than one-half of the nation's hospital beds are devoted to patients with mental illness, about four million Americans have become problem alcoholics. . . . The study of why humans behave as they do and what can be done about it can be reported as a local story in most of the 3,000 counties that make up America.

The press has always taken the larger view of this problem. In the 1920s, it made considerable use of so-called inspirational features; in the 1930s the press discovered the therapeutic value of a shorter workweek; by the 1940s the press had discovered Dr. Kinsey, and today the press is aware of juvenile delinquency and it has brought about the rebirth of the lovelorn column.  

Eyerly also felt that the nation's newspapers had given consumers poor service by belatedly discovering the hazards that affected the average reader's everyday life. This belief helps explain why Eyerly rained coverage on any trend that caught his eye as managing editor.

10 "The Promise of Daily Journalism."
11 "The Promise of Daily Journalism."
Between 1900 and the first Wilson administration, the consumer came into his own. This was the era of the packing house scandals, the tobacco trusts, the birth of the food and drug laws, meat grading, proper labeling of patent medicines. I do not need to draw a parallel; go back to your favorite newspaper’s files and search out the first coverage on cigarettes and cancer, meat grading, the use of weed killer on cranberry bogs, the injection of poultry and livestock with drugs to stimulate growth, the activity of the bureau standards. Here again the aily press discovered reader interest and values belatedly.¹²

‘The Problem Of the Retarded Adult’

Eyerly also had a distaste for superficial stories about complex subjects, which is how he regarded the Frank O’Brien story about interest rates. Eyerly thought a newspaper’s job was to educate, but he felt that was impossible if editors and writers didn’t understand the subject they were reporting on. He called it the problem of the retarded adult. In 1956 he used the problem of juvenile delinquency as an example.

There is an awareness in most communities of what goes by different names. It is juvenile delinquency or teenage hell-raising in some quarters. In others it is progressive education or the inadequacy of the public schools. Sometimes the topic is neatly capsuled under a generic title: ‘Why isn’t Johnny very smart?’

Mr. Sydney Harris suggests an alternate title: ‘Why aren’t Johnny’s parents very smart?’ He further suggests that we ought to abandon the goal of educating Johnny because it is too late to overhaul the schools, the people will not spend the money needed to do the job, and he argues that the practical approach would be to educate Johnny’s father.

The press devotes countless columns to public issues, yet the percentage of people who vote does not appear to increase. We publicize the great struggle within the ranks of educators but when the public attention is focused on the schools, the issue seems to be this. Do we want built-in wardrobes in the new building, or could Johnny learn while storing his overcoat in a more modest steel locker. Do you want your children entering a school building which has a simple poured concrete floor, or don’t you think it would be sweet if we had a nice ceramic tile design in the lobby.

¹²Speech by Frank Eyerly to the Des Moines Workshop, 13 June 1960.
If these examples appear facetious it is because we consider the newspaper part of the teaching process, and we are troubled because we wonder if we teach it very effectively.\(^{13}\)

**Solutions**

Eyerly felt that the biggest problems facing newspapers was the quality of editing, which may explain his demanding and sometimes bullying treatment of Register and Tribune editors. Eyerly favored editors taking the approach of a historian who studies the past to make better sense of the present and future for readers.

What we need badly is to elevate the quality of editing. We need more journalists and fewer newspapermen, more understanding of the English tongue and its ability to inform, and inspire, and entertain. We need to understand better the interpretation of the environment.

Editing is the recognition today of the relationship between apparently unrelated known facts so that tomorrow’s news will be understandable. In the years ahead the burden of achieving this goal is in the hands of the men and women...in schools across the land.\(^{14}\)

The solution, Eyerly felt, lay in recruiting young journalists. In a 1962 speech at Iowa City, Eyerly hypothesized that “there is nothing very wrong with journalism that will not be corrected by a steady infusion of well-educated, smart young people into the field.”

In 1964 Eyerly addressed the Associated Collegiate Press in Chicago. His speech was titled “The Promise of the Printed Page.”

\(^{13}\)The Promise of the Printed Page.” Speech by Frank Eyerly to the Associated Collegiate Press, 22 October 1964.

\(^{14}\)Speech by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.
In the talk, Eyerly recounted his days as a college editor, and noted the improvement in college newspapers since he had attended the University of Iowa.

Probably you have no idea how flabby much college journalism was a generation or two ago. Many of you have inventive and questing minds and there are a good many examples of the frankness and exploratory nature of your reaction to the problems of this decade. . . . In my four years on campus I do not recall much space in the campus newspaper devoted to the political and economic controversy of the decade which culminated in what your parents knew as the great depression, a word usually capitalized.\footnote{Speech by Frank Eyerly at The University of Iowa, 3 December 1962.}

Eyerly gave numerous speeches across college campuses during his career encouraging prospective journalists to enter the field he regarded as a calling, as opposed to a trade or profession.

If I have heard it once I have heard it 50 times in the last two years, that young people do not want to go into journalism because the daily press does not reflect a high purpose and an ultimate goal. In short, the young are idealistic and they want to live their lives in an activity that is rewarding to the spirit, that serves a useful social purpose, and that provides adequate and satisfying compensation.\footnote{Speech by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.}

Eyerly believed that newspapers provided exactly that, as he told Indiana University students in 1967.

The great difference between the academic life and the world of journalism is that as a writer or editor, you can do something about the questions that plague our society. If I were a young man or woman with a writing skill, a social conscience, and a desire to be involved in my own times, I would work my head off in a newspaper office, and I would not be influenced or dissuaded by any nonsense born in surveys that prove ‘X’ percent of the journalism majors go into public relations or television within a few years after completing their schooling.\footnote{Speech by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.}
Indeed, Eyerly recognized that young men and women represented the future of journalism.

Do not be dissuaded from this kind of endeavor by cheap and cynical and sometimes uninformed opinions that newspapers are on the decline, that magazines are in trouble or that television is a shambles. Newspapers are not in a state of decline, magazines are going to be with us for your lifetime and television ultimately will cleanse its own house under inevitable public pressure.

The printed word is the stiff spine of all communications media, even the bad jokes you hear on television originated in a script or on a teleprompter if the comedian is unable to memorize his line. . . . One does not need to be a prophet to suggest that this world is facing an arduous race between communication and catastrophe. I am sure that you will give a good account of yourselves when you leave the campus and become involved personally in the challenge of this century.¹⁸

¹⁸Speech by Frank Eyerly at Indiana University, 18 April 1967.
Chapter 8 - Retirement and Beyond

On Jan. 26, 1969, Eyerly retired as managing editor of The Register and Tribune at age 65. He was replaced by Ed Heins, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin who joined The Register in 1963 as an agriculture, business and conservation reporter.

In The Register article that accompanied the announcement, Eyerly summed up his years in journalism.

I have been blessed with a magnificent staff. The compensation in the editorial process is the discovery and training of young individuals who have made the commitment to newspaper work.

A newspaper is oriented to the human environment. Under public spirited ownership, these papers will continue to provide the people of Iowa with the kind of newspapers called for by the time, and I have no reservations about a new editorial team continuing the advances of the past.1

The HawkEye ran an editorial following Eyerly’s retirement that captured the essence of the man.

Iowa lost one of its giants last week with the retirement of Frank Eyerly. I would class him (whether he liked it or not) with Herbert Hoover and Henry Wallace among the Iowans who have made the country think. . . . The Register is what keeps Iowa on its toes. When it is right, we all kick ourselves for not having thought of it first. When it is wrong, that goads us into editorial excellence in denouncing it.

Eyerly is kind of a forbidding person. When you finally got into his office - past two attractive secretaries - you found yourself confronted by a dapper, gaily gray man, so much the case that he seems always to be saying: ‘What’s your problem? I don’t have any.’

Actually he had a lot. What other managing editor in the country ever tried to manage people like Donald Kaul, Clark Mollenhoff, Dick Wilson, Jack Wilson, to say nothing of Jim Flansburg and George Mills? Somehow he managed it, up to now. And who can blame him for retiring, while he still has a

modicum of sanity left?  

Eyerly frequently stopped by The Register to meet Ken MacDonald for lunch, but ceased being a presence in the newsroom after his retirement. He planned to write a book of his memoirs, and perhaps a journalism textbook, but neither project came to fruition. Eyerly, true to form, was never a writer, even in retirement.

After he retired, we continued to have lunch together for years and years, almost every day. And the first week or two after he retired, at lunch he was giving me glowing accounts of how well the memoirs were coming and he said, ‘I’ve got 30 pages completed already, and it’s just going beautifully.’ And then he didn’t mention them for a time or two, and finally I said, ‘Frank, how are you coming with your memoirs?’ And he got a little testy and he said, ‘Well, there isn’t any reason why I’ve got to finish them all at one time.’

And so what I suspected was I don’t think he ever touched them after that. Frank was not primarily a writer. . . . I don’t think he would ever have had the patience to have written his memoirs.  

Eyerly lived out the remainder of his days in his 231 42nd Street home, and traveling across Europe, an endeavor that was enhanced by his acceptance of airplanes at age 65.

The Rock Island had canceled its train from Des Moines to St. Louis, and so Frank took his first airplane ride to visit his daughter Jane. He’d spent all of those years, Jesus Christ, apparently 65 years resisting airplanes. The next time I saw him I said, ‘Goddammit, you’ve ruined a good story, you’ve really ruined a good story.’ He said, ‘Well, you can report that I still have reservations about the invention of the wheel.’

3Ken MacDonald interview.
4Jim Flansburg interview.
His Legacy

Eyerly’s professional legacy is not difficult to gauge. During his 23 years at the helm of The Register and Tribune, his staff won eight Pulitzer Prizes, more than any newspaper in the country with the exception of The New York Times, and countless other journalism awards.

His personal legacy at The Register is somewhat more difficult to define. Jim Flansburg said nobody ever felt indifferent about Eyerly, who was known by staffers in his later years as the old, white fox.

“They either loved the son of a bitch or they hated the son of a bitch, but they were agreed he was a son of a bitch,” Flansburg said.

Eyerly’s methods of management were controversial, and many former Register employees believe Eyerly would not last long in today’s newsrooms.

“You couldn’t do it now, they’re not afraid of the management today,” Don Kaul said.

Flansburg is even more direct.

“Hell, he wouldn’t last a minute.”

But former Register employees are also quick to note that yesterday’s editors can’t be judged by today’s standards of newsroom etiquette.

The journalism that Eyerly practiced and grew up in is substantially different than today, and it is a substantially different kind of world that we live in today. I find more and more that people strive to judge yesterday by today’s standards and so lose all ability to understand yesterday. Virtually all the copy editors and reporters when Eyerly started out in this trade were itinerant. They’d work a few years, maybe a few weeks in some place, and then move onto
the next town. They were footloose. And that required you to handle people substantially differently than if they were people on a career track who were going to be with you for a couple of years. . . . That’s something we tend to forget today.  

And if Eyerly was demanding of his staff, he also gave them the leeway and support to chase down the stories that made The Register one of the nation’s best newspapers. He was apolitical in his dealings with The Register’s Washington staff, reporter Nick Kotz said, and never tried to shape a story ideologically.

The first expose I wrote on Hubert Humphery was during LBJ’s War on Poverty. One of the programs was designed to help find summer jobs for poor kids to cool off the rioting. In the case of Post Office jobs, I found out that members of Congress were distributing these jobs to their own children. In South Dakota, one job went to the son of Humphery’s sister, and the other went to the son of the state Democratic chairman. Humphery came to town and sat down with the newspaper’s editors. He was a combination of apoplectic and in tears about his widowed sister in South Dakota and what the expose had done to him. Frank thought it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. . . . That’s an illustration of him not being overawed by people in power, and is equally a story of his own irreverence.  

The one exception to Eyerly’s indifference to politicians, Kotz said, was during the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention. Kotz wrote a story describing the unrest in Chicago streets as the convention wound down, and how Vietnam had torn the Democratic Party apart.

Eyerly loved the story, but told Kotz to add a story about Eugene McCarthy.

“He was captivated by Gene McCarthy. There was a lot more to McCarthy than being the antiwar candidate. He got caught up in that,” Kotz said.

Kaul said Eyerly felt he and the intellectual McCarthy had many similarities.

5Jim Flansburg interview.
6Nick Kotz interview.
"I think that Frank thought had he become a politician, that he would have been a lot like Gene McCarthy," Kaul said.

With that exception, Eyerly was virtually unmoved by politicians. Kaul recalled the story of a young Congressman who was unhappy with his portrayal in The Register, and made numerous attempts to meet with Eyerly through a reporter.

"I speak to senators. I spoke to a governor once. But I do not speak to congressmen," Eyerly said.

There were times when I worked for him that I hated him, but when I look back now I see a great editor and a larger than life character. His was the time of the imperial editor. Which is neither altogether good, nor bad.  

"He Loved the Des Moines Register."

Eyerly died on March 18, 1997 at the age of 93. His physical condition had deteriorated as the result of a series of strokes starting 10 years earlier, but for the most part, he retained his sharp intellect and astounding memory until the end.

At the age of 87, Eyerly became a Catholic and formed a strong friendship with the Rev. John Ludwig. At Eyerly's funeral, Ludwig recounted his discussions with Eyerly.

After we had finished lunch, Jeannette often enough managed to find some terribly important errand that needed to be taken care of - and that would leave just Frank and me to solve the problems of the world. What I soon discovered was that Frank didn’t even need me to help him do that. Those visits were always interesting to me, and I always felt as though Frank’s

7"When Frank Eyerly ran The Register."
presence connected me to a world much larger than the one I had brought with me.8

Upon Eyerly’s death, The Des Moines Register named him as one of Iowa’s notable men and women who made a difference. He had been inducted into the Hall of Fame of the University of Iowa School of Journalism six years earlier.

“He loved his wife and he loved his family,” Jeannette said. “And he loved The Des Moines Register.”

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