

Editor with an Edge

Houston Chronicle
editor Jeff Cohen, BJ '76,
has led the newspaper
through one of the
toughest periods in
media history and
in the process become
a model for the modern
newspaper editor

by Michael Hardy

photos by Jay B. Saucedo



Jeff Cohen gets mail.

"I SAW YOUR EDITORIAL ABOUT THE GULF SPILL," he reads aloud from a handwritten note he just received. "It looked like a page of U.S. government propaganda. You need to reconsider your role as a journalist..."

The elderly writer had hand-delivered the letter earlier in the morning to the *Houston Chronicle*. She even called up to Cohen's office from the lobby to make sure he had received it. "I get about five of these a day," Cohen says ruefully. "Here's one that came yesterday." He hands over a full-page, single-spaced rant about the *Chronicle's* coverage of Mexican immigration.

"These people have no right to be in our country and have not [sic] legal rights!" the letter reads. "I am tired of the Mexicans that I see in the streets, in stores, and in businesses waving the Mexican flag and chanting, 'Viva Mexico, hurray Mexico.'"

Cohen, BJ '76, responds to many of the letters personally. The one about illegal immigration, though, is sitting in his inbox. "I'm not really sure how to respond until I calm down," he says. "Anyway, that gives you an idea of the kind of people who write in."

Since 2002, Cohen has been the editor and executive vice president of the *Chronicle*, the seventh-largest daily newspaper in the country by circulation. In that time, the *Chronicle* has redesigned its print edition, added a Spanish-language supplement (*La Voz*), and expanded into social media like Facebook and Twitter. Cohen also redesigned and bulked up the paper's website, which draws close to 8 million visitors a month. More than 2 million Houstonians read the *Chronicle* online or in print each week, making it second only to the *Washington Post* in market penetration among the country's top 10 markets.

Cohen's success has not gone unnoticed. In 2007 the National Press Foundation awarded him the Benjamin Bradlee Editor of the Year award, calling him "a model for the modern newspaper editor." In 2008 the *Chronicle* was named the state's top metropolitan newspaper by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors. And this October, the University of Texas College of Communication presented him with its prestigious Robert C. Jeffrey Benefactor Award.

Like many daily newspapers, the *Chronicle* has lost circulation and advertising revenue over the past decade. But despite the difficult times, the *Chronicle* has remained profitable by streamlining its operations and aggressively expanding its online presence. During his tenure as editor, Cohen has led the paper's coverage of the Enron collapse, hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster, problems with the Houston police department's crime lab, and the 2005 explosion at BP's Texas City refinery. The *Chronicle's* investigation of the Texas City explosion, which killed 15 workers and injured almost 200 more, provided early evidence of BP's poor safety record.

"I don't think anybody covered the Texas City disaster with the intensity of the *Chronicle*, from the explosion to the resolution in the courts," Cohen says. "That obviously set us up to have a knowledge base to cover the catastrophe that was *Deepwater Horizon*."

Throughout his career, Cohen has put into practice the old journalism mantra about comforting the afflicted and afflicting



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the comfortable. Whether it's investigating BP, taking a controversial early stand against the Iraq War, or endorsing Barack Obama for president — the first time the *Chronicle* had endorsed a Democrat since Lyndon Johnson — Cohen likes to shake things up. That hasn't always gone over well in Houston, which is demographically divided between largely white, Fox News-watching suburbanites and an increasingly diverse and liberal urban population. Hence the nasty letters. But the way Cohen sees it, if he isn't making someone mad, he isn't doing his job.

"Houston is a target-rich environment," Cohen says, grinning like a hunter surveying a game preserve. "There are a lot of stories here, whether it's the energy sector, the medical center, NASA, immigration, or the drug cartels. There are people who find us too conservative and those who find us too liberal. You just have to look at the issues."

Cultivating an Editor

Cohen first became interested in journalism as an undergraduate at UT in the mid-1970s, when a friend on the staff of the *Daily Texan* asked him to write an article about the men's golf team. Although he didn't have any reporting experience, he felt confident enough to accept the assignment.

"I played golf, and I knew golf," Cohen explains. "When my byline appeared over that story, my parents were so proud of that, and I thought that maybe this is something I should pursue."

Cohen majored in journalism and rose to become the *Daily Texan's* managing editor. His favorite professor was Mike Quinn, who became a mentor to Cohen and helped him get his first post-college job, as a sports reporter for the now-defunct *San*

Antonio Light.

"Mike's classes were so good that even though you'd been out drinking beer the night before you would show up for an 8 o'clock class," Cohen says. "He was the guy who taught you right from wrong. You learned certain rules: you don't bury your lead, you don't split your infinitives, you don't misplace your modifiers. He taught me that, and it stuck with me. Then, he was always there on the end of the telephone when I needed advice in my early years as a reporter and editor."

At the *Light*, Cohen spent his first three years covering the San Antonio Spurs. During the off-season, beat reporters like Cohen would rotate through others positions at the paper. He worked on the copy desk, laid out the paper, and volunteered to write news and feature stories, experiences that became useful during his eventual ascent to upper management.

Over the next 15 years, Cohen slowly climbed the editorial ladder, from reporter, to assistant managing editor for sports and features, to managing editor, the number two position at the newspaper. In 1992 the Hearst Corporation, which owned the *Light*, announced that it had purchased the paper's local rival, the *San Antonio Express-News*, from Rupert Murdoch. After Hearst failed to find a buyer for the *Light*, it decided to close the paper, laying off hundreds of journalists. Cohen was given the thankless job of winding down the *Light's* operations.

"It was an extremely difficult period in my career," Cohen says. "It's tough to have to shut a newspaper down. So many of my good friends had lost their jobs or left San Antonio. But there are reasons these things happen. The economy in the early '90s just could not support more than one newspaper in a market." (This was true across the country. Three years later, Hearst bought Houston's second daily

newspaper, the *Houston Post*, and folded it into the *Chronicle*.)

After finishing up in San Antonio, Cohen moved to New York City to take a corporate position with Hearst. At the time, Hearst was experimenting with a little-known medium called the Internet. To someone who had started his career using a typewriter, this was heady stuff. But Cohen was intrigued, and when Hearst dispatched him to Albany, N.Y., to be the editor of the *Albany Times-Union*, he decided to try something new. In 1994 a massive outdoor music festival was held in Saugerties, N.Y., to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Woodstock. As the closest major daily newspaper to the event, the *Times-Union* sent a team of reporters and photographers. It was Cohen's idea to set up a website featuring the paper's coverage. As one of the first newspapers in the country to venture onto the Internet, the *Times-Union* was planting a flag on virgin soil.

"The people interested in Woodstock were tech-savvy, so it seemed like a natural thing to do," Cohen says. "Our traffic was low, at best, because there weren't many people who had the bandwidth to accept what we were pushing out. But it was still an important experiment because it dabbled our toe into the water."

Cohen gained a reputation in the newspaper industry as a technological innovator, and he brought his new-media savvy to Houston when Hearst appointed him editor of the *Chronicle* in 2002. For Cohen, it was a homecoming. Although he was born in Cheyenne, Wyo., Cohen moved with his parents to Houston when he was a child and graduated from Bellaire High School.

At the *Chronicle* Cohen began to re-engineer what had become, to many critics, a newspaper that was too deferential to city officials and too complacent in its



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monopoly as the city’s only daily newspaper. Cohen replaced many of the paper’s top editors with new recruits from around the country. He made high-profile hires of Nick Anderson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist, and veteran reporter Joe Holley. More importantly, though, Cohen set a new tone for the paper.

“He really doesn’t take any crap,” says deputy managing editor Kyrie O’Connor, whom Cohen lured away from the *Hartford Courant* to revamp the *Chronicle’s* arts and entertainment section. “And I think for this newspaper that was exactly the right approach. I wasn’t here under the previous management, but I have a feeling it was a little laid-back. It isn’t laid-back any more.” Using a metaphor appropriate for somebody who got his start as a sports reporter, O’Connor says that Cohen has “really upped the game here.”

Details Make the Man

Cohen wasn’t always known as an exacting, by-the-books personality. As an undergraduate at UT, he was more interested in parties and sports than academics. In a commencement address he delivered to the College of Communication’s class of 2003, Cohen admitted that if the Top Ten Percent law had been in effect in 1972 he probably wouldn’t have been accepted to the University.

“I remember when I showed [my mother] my brand new UT diploma, and I looked at her face and saw amazement,” Cohen joked in the speech.

Karen Tumulty, who worked with Cohen on the *Daily Texan*, remembers that Cohen liked to set off the building’s

fire alarm by opening the emergency exit door, a prank he continued to play at the *San Antonio Light*, where both of them ended up after graduating. Then there was Cohen’s coiffure.

“He had this gigantic cloud of curly hair around his head in college that he called the Jewfro,” says Tumulty, now a political reporter for the *Washington Post*.

He later became something of a dandy. Cohen shops at M. Penner, Houston’s finest men’s clothier, and has his Jewfro groomed alongside River Oaks heiresses at Cerón salon. In college, though, Cohen blended into the crowd. Tumulty recalls him wearing “the same raggedy jeans as everybody else.” In San Antonio, he often hosted staff parties at his apartment, where cheap beer was more likely to be found than fine wine. “He’s one of the last people I would have tagged to become a powerful newspaper editor,” Tumulty says.

But a powerful newspaper editor is exactly what Cohen became, winning numerous admirers along the way. Jim Michaels, now a military reporter for *USA Today*, worked with Cohen at the *Light* and the *Albany Times-Union*. Michaels recalls Cohen as a fearless managing editor at the *Light*. Michaels covered the military and, after writing some critical stories about a local Air Force base, was called into a meeting with the base’s public affairs representative, Cohen, and the *Light’s* editor.

“I thought I was in trouble,” Michaels says. “Jeff backed me up without batting an eye, and without giving it a second thought. He stood up to the powers that be, and I’ve seen that on a couple of occasions.”

Later, at the *Times-Union*, Cohen

allowed Michaels to temporarily step down as city editor in the wake of 9/11 to cover the impending war in Afghanistan. Throughout his career, Cohen has been known as a writer’s editor, willing to take a chance on a journalist or a story he believes in when other editors might be nervously eyeing the bottom line. “There was almost no reason for Jeff to let me go [to Afghanistan], because he would lose a city editor, and wouldn’t get much in return,” Michaels says. “Again, he didn’t hesitate to allow me to do it.”

Returning to Texas to edit the *Chronicle* gave Cohen an opportunity to reconnect with UT. He became a member of the College of Communication advisory council, serving as chair from 2006 to 2008. Cohen still drives to Austin once or twice a month to participate in council meetings. In his expansive corner office on the fifth floor of the *Chronicle* building, next to a photograph of himself with Dan Rather, another member of the advisory council, Cohen keeps the Longhorn statuette he was given for his service to the University.

“Now I have this wonderful bronze Bevo,” Cohen says, laughing as he proudly hoists the statue. “I often take it home and spoon with it in bed.”

When asked what advice he would give to today’s journalism students, who are entering the most challenging job market in recent memory, Cohen didn’t hesitate.

“Do it,” he said. “Because you can change the world. You can make your community a better place. You walk by the UT Tower and inscribed near the base is ‘Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.’ That is what we do here.” 