

# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

DIGITAL NEWSBOOK

## Voyages of Discovery *Into* New Media



**'to promote and elevate  
the standards of journalism'**

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## Voyages of Discovery into New Media

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# The New Front Page: The Digital Revolution

A former newspaper editor figures out how to fund serious digital journalism with an annual budget less than what newsrooms sometimes spent on one investigative project.

BY JOEL KRAMER

**A** lot of pixels are being spilled these days reflecting on the future of newspapers, news, journalists and journalism. I spent my career in newspapers, first as a journalist and later as a publisher, and I left when the business was financially near its peak. With the for-profit model now shriveling, I've spent the past 16 months trying to build one example of what might be coming next—a not-for-profit enterprise providing high-quality regional journalism on the Web.

Here are some reflections from that battlefield.

MinnPost is a certain kind of nonprofit journalism enterprise—one that aims to eventually break-even on operating revenues, such as advertising, sponsorship, membership and perhaps other sources such as syndication.

This is different from a pure phil-

anthropic endeavor, like ProPublica, which (at least in its current plan) depends for its success on the continuing generosity of foundations or very large individual donors.

MinnPost has had early support from major donors and foundations, and we believe that serious journalism is a community asset, not just a consumer good, which is why we're nonprofit. But we are focused on breaking even by 2011, or at the latest 2012, without relying on foundation support to keep the lights on.

Why? Because (a) we think it's possible to reach breakeven; and (b) we think it's desirable, since foundations already have so many causes to support, and it's questionable whether they have the capacity to support journalism on the expansive scale that may be needed to replace what's being lost, especially regionally, in the for-profit industry.

We can argue the merits and demerits of each approach and, in our age of digital experimentation, it seems wise to let every flower bloom. But it's important to understand MinnPost's approach, to make sense of my dispatch from the frontlines.

## Traffic

We draw our MinnPost members—more on how people become one later—from among our readers, and because the inventory we have to sell to advertisers is our page views, traffic to our Web site, MinnPost.com, is critical to our financial success.

Google Analytics tells us exactly how many times each item we publish gets read. This has a powerful effect. It makes us want to do more of what gets read, and less of what doesn't, while remaining true to our mission.

What does this mean? A glance at MinnPost lets a visitor know that it's for serious newsreaders. Our brochure proudly declares, "NO Britney. NO Paris. NO Lindsay." MinnPost is not a place to visit for stories about entertainment celebrities, or sex, crime and advice for the lovelorn—even though we know that such content would bulk up our page views.

The screenshot shows the MinnPost.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the MinnPost logo and 'ArtsArena' branding. Below that, the date 'Friday, February 23, 2009' is displayed. The main content area features a large article with a photo of two men, likely related to the 'MinnPost.com' headline. To the left, there's a 'POLITICAL AGENDA' sidebar with several small portraits and text. To the right, there's a 'ARTSARENA' section and a 'COMMUNITY VOICES' section. The bottom of the page has a 'MinnPost APPLICANTS' section with a list of names and contact information.

Even for our serious audience, we've learned that \$600 spent on one long story produces a lot less traffic than \$600 spent generating six to 12 shorter items. We still do longer stories every day, including many that combine in-depth reporting and analysis with personal voice.

But a careful reader of our site over the past year will note that we have a great many more short, quick hits, published all day long. So while we are spending less on news today than a year ago, our traffic has more than doubled during that time. On a three-month rolling average, we now have more than 200,000 unique monthly visitors and more than 700,000 page views—and in mid-February we enjoyed our first 31-day period with more than one million page views.

We are confident we can keep this number growing and keep

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a MinnPost.com article. The page layout includes a top navigation bar with categories like HOME, NEWS, and OPINION. A sidebar on the left contains several real estate advertisements for properties like 'EXPOSED brick', 'NATURAL light', 'space that WORKS', 'CROWN 500 - 8,300 SF', and 'WINTERFlyerboard'. The main content area features the article title 'Meet the Star Tribune's big creditors' by David Brauer, published on Jan 18, 2009. The article text discusses the Star Tribune's financial situation and lists major creditors. A portrait of David Brauer is shown on the right side of the article.

quality high. Even short-form work can involve outstanding reporting and analysis—for evidence, check out David Brauer's Braublog ([www.minnpost.com/braublog](http://www.minnpost.com/braublog)) any day. [A screen grab is on this page.] But it does mean that we do a lot fewer ambitious investigative reports than I would like us to publish.

In 1974, I copyedited a Newsday series called "The Heroin Trail," which won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. I'll bet Newsday

spent more money on that project (adjusted to today's dollars) than MinnPost's entire news budget in its first year. Our most ambitious MinnPost investigation, financed by a Watchdog Journalism fund we created, was a series on the resegregation of Twin Cities-area public schools, and it cost less than \$15,000, fully loaded. Another major project was a series on the intimidating reign of our former state attorney general. Its author, Eric Black, acknowledged that it made him antsy to give up daily posting for weeks while he worked on it.

## News Staffing

MinnPost is a professional journalism site. It has always been part of our mission to support professional journalism and pay for it. But how we do so has changed substantially since we launched.

At the outset, our editors were on staff, and all our writers were freelance, paid by the piece. Some critics wondered whether it was possible to publish a five-day-a-week news site with all freelance reporters and writers. Our editors wondered, too. The nightmare question was, "What if one morning all the writers say they're not available to-

day because they have other assignments, or they want to play golf?"

During 2008, we added one full-time writer, then a second, reducing the freelance budget accordingly. Later still, we put four of our best reporters on full weekly retainers and several more on part-time retainers—again reducing the budget for paying by the piece. In January, we added a full-time Washington correspondent, an unusual step when so many bureaus are shrinking or dissolving. The new system works much better. The critics were right.

## Paying for News

Like almost all news on the Web, MinnPost content is free to all, but we do ask our readers to become members, which entails making an annual donation. This is a variation on the model that public radio and public television use but minus the intrusive pledge weeks.

The good news is that more than 1,250 people have signed on as members during the first 15 months, with donations ranging from \$10 a year to \$20,000. On our membership list, available at [www.minnpost.com/members](http://www.minnpost.com/members), you can see that the two most popular cate-

gories are Cub Reporter (\$50–\$99) and Night Police Reporter (\$100–\$249).

Yet we know that many thousands of our regular readers are not donating. Even some who have told us how much they like what we do are not yet donating. To reach breakeven, we probably will need 5,000 donors by 2012. And we need to achieve these results without expensive incentives, like mugs or CDs, and without paying a large membership-support staff. (Ideas are welcome.)

We regularly ask ourselves whether we could charge for premium content on our site. With such a strong expectation out there that the Internet will be free, we have not yet come up with a viable idea. (Again, your ideas are welcome.)

From the outset, I assumed that advertising could not by itself sustain high-quality regional journalism, for two main reasons: Serious public affairs subjects and local orientation are both bad routes to maximizing traffic, and the staggering number of publishers online depresses ad rates, so that without high traffic it's not possible to generate big revenues. Before MinnPost launched, I estimated that the eventual breakeven would be based

on 70 percent from advertising, 30 percent from membership. With a year of experience, I now believe it will be more like 50-50. Membership is challenging, but advertising is more so.

Our strategy is based on providing advertisers a high-quality environment and excellent service and asking them to pay accordingly. For example, we don't allow intrusive advertising that interferes with the visitor's reading experience. We also help our advertisers create effective banners and landing pages.

In one respect, this is working. Our advertisers pay \$15 or more per thousand impressions, or appearances, of their ad, and we have been able to hold this rate in these tough times—though we have increased volume discounts, and we now target local advertisers' ads to local readers only, thereby increasing their value. Meanwhile, our local competitors often offer our customers half that rate, and national networks like Google Ads offer to sell ads onto our site for a tenth of what we charge or less.

But the number of advertisers willing to pay for that quality is still too small. This much I know: If the rate for locally sold advertising drops to \$1, or even \$5, only pub-



lishers with truly gigantic global traffic will survive on ad revenues.

Increasingly, the pitch we're making to advertisers is to sponsor part of the site, rather than just buy banner ad flights. This is working well. In the past two months, we've sold two sponsorships: One for the Daily Glean, a mid-morning roundup summarizing and linking to the best of what's in the other local media, written with attitude, and one for Community Voices, our daily op-ed feature. These opportunities give sponsors more exposure than they would get with regular banner ads and a stronger connection to our core mission.

Foundations have provided critically important funding to MinnPost. The Knight Foundation has been especially generous, but they told us from the outset that they wanted us to find local foundation support, too. We now have two

The screenshot displays the MinnPost.com website interface. At the top, the header includes the site name "MinnPost.com" with the tagline "A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO NEWS" and navigation links for HOME, REGION, WORLDWIDE, POLICE, HEALTHCARE, BUSINESS, ARTS, SPORTS, WELLNESS, and COMMUNITY VOICES. A secondary navigation bar lists ABOUT | CONTACT | DONATE | SIGN UP FOR DAILY GLEAN. On the right, there is a call to action: "Become a member of MinnPost.com!".

The main content area features a "What's your vision?" section with a "MINNEAPOLIS FOUNDATION" logo and a "THE DAILY GLEAN" section. The "Daily Glean" article is titled "Everybody's scrambling for a local Obama angle" by Doug Green, dated Monday, Jan. 18, 2008. The article text includes: "The late Thomas Griffin, who was known as 'the house liberal' of Time magazine, once described journalism as 'history on the run.' All over the world, the media are on the run, trying to come up with new ways to describe the historic meeting of almost President Barack Obama's inauguration. And everyone is attempting to come up with a local angle to the international story." Below this, another snippet mentions "Minn reporter Brent Williams is going with Obama and a boy to D.C." and "The State's Pam Louwage is on a bus with 22 students from Harvard Prep Academy and 19 adults."

On the left side, there is a vertical menu for "MINNPOST'S Arts arena" with categories: BLOGGING IN THE ARTS COMMUNITY, FINE ART, THEATER, DANCE, BOOKS, CONCERTS, FILM, ARCHITECTURE, POETRY, JAZZ, GALLERIES, MUSICALS, CLUBS, OPERA, ROCK, DESIGN, SCULPTURE, BLUES, VIDEO, Q&A'S, PREVIEWS, and REVIEWS.

At the bottom center, there is a "COMMUNITY VOICES" banner with the text "COMMENTARY AND OPINION". On the right side, there is a "RECENT EDITORS OF THE DAILY GLEAN" section with a photo of the editors and the text: "You have all day to scour the Internet, but The Daily Glean scans the cream before that first cup of coffee. The Glean distills facts from multiple sources — the morning papers, late local news, and overnight web offerings — for a fast-paced summary of important and interesting local stories. And when facts collide, The Glean will note that too."

major Minnesota foundations, the Blandin Foundation and The Minneapolis Foundation, supporting us with sizeable grants as well, along with smaller grants from a few corporate foundations. But our challenge, confronted by all nonprofit enterprises, not just those in journalism, is that we need unrestricted operating funds to sustain us until we fully develop our operational revenues—and many foundations prefer to fund a specific new activity. Right now, without the help of these foundations, we could not

survive, and we are working to add additional ones, both national and local.

## Finding Our Place on the Web

When we launched, and occasionally since, some observers have predicted our demise because we're a bunch of old newspaper people who don't "get the Internet." In response I readily admit that our primary interest is sustaining high-quality journalism, not exploiting what the Internet makes possible. But that doesn't mean that we have not been open to learning all we can about how best to use the medium to achieve our goal.

Some things that the Web makes possible might not help us get there. For example, take a look at the unfettered comments that populate so many Web sites. From day one, MinnPost has accepted—and encouraged—comments on all our articles, but we have insisted on civility and set two hurdles in place to ensure it.

1. Those who want to leave a comment must register, and their full real names are attached to their comments.
2. Comments are prescreened by

volunteer moderators and rejected not only for foul or hateful language but also for things like name-calling.

We took plenty of heat from Web-savvy readers for this decision. But as readers have watched the quality of comment on respected sites that don't require real names, many are now grateful for our approach. Recently we published our 7,000th comment. Some sites with looser standards appear to be reconsidering their no-holds-barred policies.

On the other hand, the Web makes possible the convergence of the written word and video, and in this realm we are playing and learning. We have discovered, for example, that high-quality documentary video raises the same challenge as investigative reporting: high cost for the traffic generated. But rougher, newsier video works great.

Interactivity and social media have been more difficult for us to figure out for our site and audience, so we're not as far along as I'd like on crowdsourcing stories, for example. But we are now tapping into a great community for getting tips, spreading the word about our work, and other forms of community building such as Twitter. Min-

npostnow, our Twitter account, was launched in June with a couple of dozen followers and, eight months later, we have more than 1,300.

## Guiding Those Who Follow

I receive calls almost every week from people in this country and around the world seeking my advice about starting a regional Web site. My colleagues who have started sites in San Diego, Chicago, New Haven, and St. Louis get these calls, too, which is one of the reasons we're exploring starting a consortium of nonprofit regional online news sites: to help others get started. [See articles about these efforts in St. Louis on page 12, and in San Diego on page 18.]

I answer their questions and ask a few of my own. My number one question: Do you have significant start-up funds? When I started MinnPost, we had commitments of one year's operating budget, about \$1.2 million. The business plan called for having two, but my startup donors and I agreed that the time was right in late 2007 to begin, so we did so even though we were undercapitalized. It was the right decision, but it means I spend a great deal of my time finding the

funding to sustain us through the next few years instead of devoting all my energy to the things that will sustain us longer term.

Many of the callers tell me they have no start-up funds in hand yet. "Well," I say, "I'd start by getting some."

With each new announcement of a paper closing, or a news company contemplating bankruptcy, or a dozen more journalism jobs being eliminated, my belief intensifies that the nonprofit approach has the best chance of sustaining serious regional journalism. But I am reporting back from the frontline of this digital journalism revolution that making it happen is no picnic. The same forces working against the for-profit model make self-sustaining nonprofit models challenging, too.

A lot of people are rooting for us to succeed, even counting on us to succeed. We're making progress, hanging in, and learning and adapting every day. No promises, only possibilities. ■

*Joel Kramer, CEO and editor of MinnPost.com, was editor of the (Minneapolis) Star Tribune from 1983 to 1991 and publisher and president from 1992 to 1998.*

# Watchdog Analysis: Offering Context and Perspective Online

At the Beacon in St. Louis, reporters attempt to ‘provide context to illuminate why something is happening, explain what’s at stake, and assess what might—or what should—happen next.’

BY MARGARET WOLF FREIVOGEL

The spotlight often focuses, justifiably, on the threats that downsized newsrooms pose to investigative reporting—the kind of muckraking that should (but didn’t) spot a governor dickering over the value of a U.S. Senate seat. But investigative reporting has a less celebrated cousin in the family of watchdog journalism—that is hard-hitting analysis. It is equally important and equally threatened by the economic earthquake rattling journalism.

Investigative reporting exposes corruption. Watchdog analysis exposes sloppy thinking by raising uncomfortable questions about public policy and political issues. Both are essential for keeping public discussion real and public officials honest. For example: Did the

Senate really have the legal authority to refuse to seat the appointee of Illinois’s tainted governor? For days, most senators vowed they would prevent Roland Burris from taking the seat vacated by President Barack Obama. But a previous court case involving Representative Adam Clayton Powell and other legal precedents seemed to offer strong precedent that said they’d have to seat Burris.

We reported this in the St. Louis Beacon, our online-only nonprofit regional news site, [www.stlbeacon.org](http://www.stlbeacon.org), that launched last spring. Our reporting—and analysis—might not have directly influenced the Senate’s decision to seat Burris, but it did give our readers telling and little-known facts that turned out to be important in the outcome of the controversy.

## Watchdog Analysis

At first glance, an online-only news publication might not seem the ideal home for watchdog analysis. The Web is known for breaking news, short video, and pithy opinions. Watchdog analysis requires words, sometimes many of them, and it demands patient attention to looking at issues from several perspectives. At the Beacon, we're acutely aware of these challenges. Yet we do this work because we regard watchdog analysis, along with investigative reporting, as among our core responsibilities and greatest opportunities for serving our region.

Among our founders are several veteran St. Louis Post-Dispatch expats who still take inspiration from the tradition of the newspaper's three editors named Joseph Pulitzer, whose platform commands "always be drastically independent," and "never be satisfied with merely printing news." These two phrases capture the approach and value of the entire genre of watchdog analysis.

"News That Matters" is the Beacon's motto. Amidst the flood of in-

formation swamping all of us, our mission is to help St. Louisans understand events, trends and issues that have long-lasting significance for our region. To do this, we provide watchdog analysis that takes several forms. We give readers the story behind the story. We provide context to illuminate why something is happening, explain what's at stake, and assess what might—or what should—happen next. We raise pertinent and sometimes impertinent questions that can fundamentally reshape the assumptions of a current debate.

Our most ambitious and sustained effort has been a project called "Facing the Mortgage Crisis."<sup>1</sup> It began early last summer, when subprime mortgage foreclosures were mounting, but the larger economic meltdown was not yet apparent. Working in partnership with our local public television station KETC, which mobilized resources to help prevent foreclosures, the Beacon zeroed in on a series of tough questions.

How did so many homeowners get overextended? Why was the larger economy ensnared in their

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<sup>1</sup> Stories in this series can be read and viewed at [www.stlbeacon.org/facing\\_the\\_mortgage\\_crisis](http://www.stlbeacon.org/facing_the_mortgage_crisis).

problems? Why was it so difficult to funnel help to those who needed it? Would the proposed solutions work? Beacon reporter Mary Delach Leonard dug deep into each one to understand and analyze what was known. To do this, she explored St. Louisans' housing situations and tapped experts with St. Louis perspectives.

To our surprise, perhaps the most insightful explanation of the big picture emerged when Leonard focused microscopically on the plight of one person, Maureen McKenzie. This reporting took weeks of effort as Leonard worked to gain McKenzie's confidence, pored over her documents, tracked down and questioned her originating mortgage broker, and interviewed counselors and consumer advocates who put her situation in context. As Leonard's reporting was in motion, the economic crisis exploded.

The Beacon introduced our three-part series about McKenzie this way:

The collapse of some of the nation's oldest financial institutions started on Main Street America with hundreds and thousands of homeowners

such as 56-year-old Maureen McKenzie of Kirkwood who in May lost to foreclosure the small ranch house that had been in her family since it was built after World War II. How could this happen? The answer is ... complicated. The Beacon will unravel the story of how Maureen McKenzie of Kirkwood, Mo., lost her 900 square feet of the American Dream.

McKenzie's experience, and Leonard's reporting, challenged conventional wisdom about the mortgage crisis. Most discussion at the time presumed borrowers were largely to blame for overextending themselves to satisfy their outsized consumer appetites. This longtime homeowner wanted nothing more than to stay in the house she'd always loved. But aggressive lenders, who had much to gain and little to lose by luring her into a loan she could not afford, played a big role in her demise.

McKenzie was a cautious borrower. Yet the explanation she was given of the terms of her variable rate loan made it nearly impossible for an average consumer to understand the potentially dire conse-

quences that would befall her—and so many others. The truth is that she'd be losing ground financially even while she made her monthly payments. And while it might theoretically make sense to renegotiate loan terms so that homeowners like McKenzie could keep their homes, time and the fractured nature of the mortgage market made this impossible, and she lost her home.

McKenzie's story did not have a happy ending, save that her courage in sharing her experience enlightened others about the pitfalls they might face. And it instructed the larger community about the complexities of bad mortgages that, to this day, remain the knot at the center of our tangled economy.

Like good investigative reporting, good watchdog analysis begets new lines of inquiry. The Beacon's mortgage crisis coverage has branched into related questions.

The screenshot shows the St. Louis Beacon website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like Home, News/Politics, Health/Economy, Arts & Life, Videos, About the Beacon, Member area, and a search bar. The main content area features an article titled "Anatomy of a foreclosure: For Sale - A House full of memories (Part 1)". The article text begins with "The collapse of some of the nation's largest financial institutions started on Main Street Avenue and thousands of homeowners such as 66-year-old Roseanne Robinson of Kirkwood who is now set to foreclose the small craft house that had been in her family since it was built after World War II. How could this happen? The answer is... complicated. Over the next three days, the Beacon will unveil the story of how Roseanne Robinson of Kirkwood, Mo., lost her 500 square foot of the American Dream. Read part 1 or part 2." Below the text is a photo of a woman speaking at a microphone, with the caption "Roseanne Robinson talks the Chapter 9 panel of her town's first steps for getting her house back." To the right of the main article, there are several sidebar widgets: "INAUGURATION 2009" with a photo of a crowd, "THE VIEW FROM ST. LOUIS" with a photo of a street scene, and "Facing the Mortgage Crisis" with a graphic and text: "Facing the Mortgage Crisis: The first part of an ongoing series by the Beacon and SFTL. Created by an mortgage foreclosure - how they're affecting St. Louis area residents and where to turn for help. Seeking help early is the best option. No fee help call 1-800-457-4456." The website footer includes "St. Louis Beacon" and "Public Insight Network".

For example, if the federal government is bailing out big banks, how will this initiative affect smaller ones? (Local bankers characterized the plan unfair and unwise.) Why hasn't the Wall Street bailout trickled down to Main Street? (Local housing counselors identified three alarming reasons and predicted that the wave of foreclosures will continue to gather momentum.<sup>2</sup>)

Our most recent related project, dubbed "Beacon-omics," addresses

<sup>2</sup> This analysis piece by Leonard can be read at: [www.stlbeacon.org/facing\\_the\\_mortgage\\_crisis/bailout\\_hasn\\_t\\_trickled\\_to\\_main\\_street](http://www.stlbeacon.org/facing_the_mortgage_crisis/bailout_hasn_t_trickled_to_main_street).

economic questions that are obvious but still perplexing: Why is deflation bad? What, exactly, are mortgage-backed securities? Is 0.00 percent interest a good idea?

Just as investigative journalism gives citizens the information they need to hold public officials accountable from a legal and ethical standpoint, watchdog analysis provides the information citizens need to hold them accountable for sound public policy.

## How We Do What We Do

Why are we doing this kind of journalism online? The first reason is happenstance. Print and broadcast newsrooms are shedding reporters and institutional memory. New online regional news sites like the Beacon offer an immediate home for serious work—and as we read about the loss of newsroom jobs, the Beacon is interviewing for new hires.

It's also true that online news sites are ideal for meeting citizens' needs for information—when and at whatever depth they choose. A Web-based news organization can provide instantaneous coverage of the latest developments on a topic such as the mortgage crisis.

At the same time, we can compile in-depth analysis of context and potential solutions and make this material constantly and easily accessible.

Having spent 34 years working in print, I know that much newsroom effort is geared toward playing up stories that will appeal to “everyone”—an elusive concept that often results in lowest common denominator coverage of little interest to anyone. Digital stories, we're learning, get traction when they're very interesting to some group of people—usually those who are knowledgeable about the issue and eager to learn more. By digging deeply on questions that matter, we can construct a path to understanding complicated issues, and anyone's access to this path is just a mouse click away.

Finally, as good journalists know, the experience and wisdom that make watchdog analysis possible reside not in newsrooms but with people in the community. The Web is by its nature an interactive medium, so this makes it easier to draw community resources into a larger conversation.

Certainly, in the short time we've been doing this, we haven't taken full advantage of all of the ways



that we can do watchdog analysis online. We'd like to make better use of multimedia tools and not rely so much on our words alone. By hiring more reporters, we could pay sustained attention to more issues—and now, with a Knight Foundation grant for local reporting, we will make advances in meeting this goal.

It's been less than a year since the Beacon was launched. Our staff and resources are nowhere near the size of a major metro newsroom. Yet around us we find increasing recognition that our watchdog analysis is important. Fortunately, we've

also found a willingness among St. Louisans and some foundations to step forward with support so the Beacon can continue the work we have begun—work we hope will demonstrate how vital kinds of reporting can be done in digital media and find new audiences who appreciate the effort. ■

*Margaret Wolf Freivogel is editor of the St. Louis Beacon (stlbeacon.org). She previously worked as a reporter, assistant Washington bureau chief, and assistant managing editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.*

NIEMAN REPORTS • WINTER 2008

## The Search for True North: New Directions in a New Territory

Just as the motor car replaced the horse and buggy a century ago, the vehicles in which news and information travel to reach their audience are shifting from print to digital, from television to hand-held readers. In this time of accelerating change, how journalists do their work and what elements of journalism will survive this digital transformation loom as questions and concerns. By heading in new directions and exploring the potential to be found in this new territory of interactivity and social media, journalists — and others contributing to the flood of information — will be resetting the compass bearing of what constitutes “true north” for journalism in our time. — Melissa Ludtke, Editor

# Defining an Online Mission: Local Investigative Reporting

At the nonprofit [voiceofsandiego.org](http://voiceofsandiego.org), ‘From our first day our job has been to fill the gaps between what people want from their local media and what they have.’

BY ANDREW DONOHUE AND SCOTT LEWIS

There’s a common refrain that comes with many commentaries lamenting the decline of newspapers these days: Investigative reporting is an expensive endeavor.

Our experience proves that bit of conventional wisdom dead wrong. For the past four years, we’ve been running [voiceofsandiego.org](http://voiceofsandiego.org), a nonprofit online-only daily publication dedicated to local in-depth and investigative reporting. And, on a budget of less than one million dollars, we’ve been able to produce stories that have an impact on a daily basis by running an efficient organization of full-time, professional journalists free from the burden of printing an actual paper.

Indeed, we’ve learned that it’s not investigative reporting that’s expensive, it’s printing a newspaper.

Sam Zell, owner of the Tribune Company, says that 86 percent of

the cost of the newspaper business is print, paper, distribution and promotion. We turn that on its head and spend the vast majority of our budget on the actual journalists—the people out on the street finding the best stories. Web hosting and production represent a sliver of our costs. And though we have a similar financing model to public broadcasting, our costs are also a tiny fraction of what it takes to run a local affiliate of NPR.

New York Times investigations editor Walt Bogdanich recently summed it up concisely in a conversation with readers: “Good investigative reporting depends less on money than on the commitment of editors and the skill of its reporters.”

## Nonprofit Online Journalism

Still, the decline of the major daily newspaper in metropolitan ar-

eas around the nation means that more and more important stories are going untold, especially in America's big cities. While it won't be the only vision for journalism's future to spring up as newspapers shrink, the nonprofit online-only model is uniquely situated to fill the rapidly growing gaps in the local news landscape for a number of reasons:

**Efficiency:** The Internet is simply more efficient and cost-effective than any other medium available to a local entity. While print still provides newspapers with a lion's share of their revenue, that share is continually declining, and we can plan for the future without having to drag a dying paper product with us. Especially in local investigative reporting where there are few travel costs, in-

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**Audit Finds 'Fraud,' Details SEDC Problems Beyond Bonuses**  
The audit paints the picture of a public agency where top officials consistently resorted to creative and clandestine means to boost their own pay and perks.  
• By **ANDREW DOMONIK** and **WILL CARLSON** | Sept. 11  
• **SEDC Audit (all)**  
• **Redevelopment Gone Wrong: The SEDC Investigates**  
• **Audit: SEDC Lapses in Conflict** — 11:49 a.m.  
• **SEDC Audit: 'Unappreciated' Spending** — 10:23 a.m.

**THIS JUST IN**  
**Education Plans at Children's Museum:**  
The space originally earmarked for a charter school is now rotating among visiting schools. • Sept. 11 — 9:37 a.m.

**Court Denies Port:**  
Proposed for massive development at old air. will go on hold. • Sept. 11 — 9:32 a.m.

**Personal DNA Test Deal:**  
A genetic screening company slashes prices, but health officials are skeptical. • Sept. 10 — 3:47 p.m.

**What the SEDC Audit Means**

**Jury Slaps City with \$8 Million Police Misconduct Verdict**  
Panel finds that officers were negligent when he knocked man to the ground in 2006.  
• By **DAVID WASHBURN** | Sept. 11

**Iconic Downtown Project Scrapped in Scandal's Midst**  
Fundamental betrayal of trust' dooms \$400-million skyscraper proposal.  
• By **ROB GIBBY** | Sept. 11  
• Nancy Graham's Changing Bay

**FROM THE COMMENTARY**  
**Elections and Wealth**  
The biggest divide in the country on display recently was not between delegates of the two different parties, but between those delegates and the general population.  
• By **James O. Gombinovich** | Sept. 11

**FROM LETTERS**  
**Think Again, Mayor**  
Leave the district attorney out of the SEDC

**Helen Edison Lecturer**  
**Donald Kennedy**  
"Where Science and Policy Converge"  
October 1st at 7:00pm  
[click here for details](#)

  
**Election Central**  
What Would

It Usually Makes

vestigative reporting is more about mission than it is about cost.

**Mission:** Reporters step into this newsroom with a very clear mission: produce in-depth and investigative reporting. They don't have to worry about being a paper of record, covering a celebrity trial, rushing to a harmless house fire, or figuring out what direction their general-interest publication is going. They learn how to let the small stuff slide in order to go after the more ambitious stories. They don't touch anything if it isn't a clearly local story. This is our best route to making the biggest impact.

**Measuring Success:** As a nonprofit, our success is measured in one simple metric: the impact of our stories. Dedicated journalists forever have measured their success by the impact of their stories. But their organizations as a whole have always had different measurements. Quality journalism in many of those is important. But so is returning a profit to the owner or shareholders. And in today's market, when newspaper Web sites are scratching and clawing for every hit in order to raise advertising revenues, those goals of providing meaningful journalism and

profits can directly collide. We don't have to make money for anyone, just make our budget. And when we go to our board of directors every quarter, we have a very simple question to answer: What was the impact of your stories?

**More Revenue Streams:** Taking the very long view, we have more revenue streams available to us than do most media operations. We have the nonprofit streams long used by public broadcasting: foundation grants, corporate sponsors, and membership drives.

Civically engaged San Diegans are realizing that journalism at its core is a public service institution and, as it is threatened, they're going to have to fund it like they've funded so many other causes they care about, just as they do the museum or soup kitchen. We also accept online advertising. While this is a small pillar of our budget, we see it as a significant potential growth area as we invest more resources into drawing advertisers to our site and the value we offer becomes better defined by the marketplace.

**Starting From Scratch:** We were fortunate to be original and au-

tonomous—not an offshoot of a daily newspaper or other established news organization. We don't have legacy habits, costs or debts. We've never had to be everything to everyone, nor have we ever tried to be. We don't need to try to find room in our budget to still do local in-depth government reporting while also have a staff-produced society column or cars section or things that can be handled by national publications such as movie reviews, reviews of personal electronic devices, or coverage of presidential politics.

## Deciding What Stories to Cover

We don't try to be what the newspaper used to be—and is still trying desperately to be—a general-interest collection of things. It's easy to get stretched a mile wide and an inch deep, especially when you're operating on limited resources. People every day always want to know why we don't cover this or that.

From our first day our job has been to fill the gaps between what people want from their local media and what they have. So how do we decide what we cover? This is a key

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**We don't try to be what the newspaper used to be—and is still trying desperately to be—a general-interest collection of things.**

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question, and the answer is likely different in every community, but the two principles that guide our decision-making are firm.

1. We cover something only if we can do it better than anyone else or if no one else is doing it (which, by default, would make us the best at it).
2. We look at what issues aren't getting sufficient coverage in the local media.

In San Diego, we've gradually identified those as the cornerstone quality of life issues. Those aren't static, though. As local media outlets continue to shrink at an alarming rate, the gaps that we were created to fill keep expanding.

As we decide how to handle this situation, again we find benefit and

direction in our mission. Throughout 2007 and 2008, there were many distractions in San Diego, as in any big city, that could have proved devastating to any long-term investigative projects. A less disciplined approach would have had us running around with the media pack from daily press conferences that can bog down a beat to the scandalous trial of the day, only to duplicate what other news outlets were already covering. Despite cuts, there are still plenty of reporters in town doing this kind of coverage.

But time and time again, we reminded ourselves to stay focused—focused on doing something special, on making sure we added something to a community that needed it.

It was during that period that we performed arguably the most significant and sustained investigative journalism to emerge from any outlet in the city. We broke open scandals at two local redevelopment agencies that have led to criminal charges, scrapped development projects, and complete overhauls at the agencies. We exposed the police chief's lengthy history of misrepresenting crime statistics, detailed a school official's financial misdeeds,

and unveiled a group of other investigations that never would have been told without the emergence of a new local publication.

Again, it wasn't a huge investment that produced this. It wasn't a legacy newspaper that dedicated dozens of writers and millions of dollars to these stories. It was a simple mission pursued efficiently.

Our goals now are to expand to continue to fill as much of the growing gap as efficiently as possible. And while some, like the police chief, finance guru, or ousted redevelopment agency presidents might not be entirely excited about that, San Diego residents are, judging from the enthusiasm among our donors and readers. ■

*Andrew Donohue, as editor, and CEO Scott Lewis direct voiceof-sandiego.org, a four-year-old nonprofit online daily dedicated to local in-depth and investigative reporting.*

# Crowdfunded Reporting: Readers Pay for Stories to Be Told

‘Reporting for Spot.Us, where money directly changes hands, is the same as reporting any story for Wired.com. For Spot.Us, the ethical promise inheres in the transparency of the funding.’

BY ALEXIS MADRIGAL

It seems to be a time-honored journalistic tradition to launch partnerships over beer. So whatever else David Cohn and I might have gone on to do differently, know that some things are still sacred among reporters.

That night, as I heard his Spot.Us idea, I knew I wanted to be involved. Floating around the San Francisco reporting scene, I’d heard plenty of ideas for new Web sites, but they all relied on the same advertising model—Punch-a-Monkey ad sales. Few people were thinking about new business models, particularly one requiring people to donate money to pay reporters to do stories.

So happens that a year before, I talked with a very smart, young engineer who spun some yarns about how corn-based fuels get from

Iowa fields to California refineries. He’d convinced me that there was a story in the fragility of the biofuels transportation infrastructure in our state and that ethanol’s role in our state’s energy system could bear deeper examination. At any minute, this engineer said, a derailed train could make the whole enterprise a very difficult proposition.

The story was a little too local for my day job at Wired and a little too technical for San Francisco Magazine. It stuck with me, however, as a story in search of a home. When I’d hear a train whistle or read another overheated story about biofuels, I’d say, “You know, I should write that story.” So I wrote up a quick pitch for Spot.Us, and to my great surprise in 11 days various people had come to the Web site, read my proposal, and decided to fund my story.

People — OK, only other journalists — often ask me, “Did you think about who was funding your story?” Sure, I did. I wanted to thank them by providing the most honest reporting I could. Even if I’d wanted to write what the funders wanted, I don’t think I could have. It would have taken a lot of research just to figure out their angle on biofuels. As I told a Dutch weekly when they interviewed me about it, “There was no John ‘I Love Ethanol’ Smith on the [funders] list.” And besides, this was my story that they’d agreed to fund, and I was the one going to report it. None of my funders contacted me or in any way suggested that I push the story in a given direction.

It’s easy to take potshots at Spot.Us in a vacuum. Wouldn’t it be

great if reporters could be paid by unmarked bills falling from the sky? Then we could write about anything we wanted. But there is a monetary system that supports journalists, which can’t be ignored, even though that seems to be the basis for a lot of old-school ethical thought.

The screenshot shows a web page for a story on Spot.Us. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Register / Login' and 'COMMENTS'. Below that is the 'SPOT.US' logo and buttons for 'Start a Story' and 'Browse Stories'. The main content area features the story title 'Story: Ethanol Could be a Weak Link in State's Energy Network'. Below the title, it lists the author 'Story by Alexis Madrigal' and 'Fact Check Editor David Coim'. A small image of a landscape with a wind turbine is shown. To the right of the image, there is a 'History of this story' section with a 'PITCH' and 'Keywords' section. The pitch text reads: 'California's biofuels usage is expected to jump nearly 600 million gallons over the next couple of years, but the ethanol supply is already stretched to its limits. Almost all of...'. The keywords listed are 'ethanol'.

**The first Spot.Us story involved an investigation of the role ethanol will play in California’s energy network. Reported by Madrigal, 13 supporters donated \$250 in 11 days to enable him to report this story. Six months later, investigative proposals on Spot.Us were receiving an average of \$750 donated by 35 to 40 supporters.**



Take my day job. Wired is an advertising-supported publication and Wired Science, my particular section, often gets ads purchased by the same companies, Shell and Chevron, mostly. Every day I see their ads next to my stories. Sometimes, the colors of our logo (fortuitously) even match their ads. At the end of the day, I know who pays my salary, and it's only nominally Conde Nast. But that doesn't change the responsibility that I have to our readers to report from as close to the locus of truth as I can.

Reporting for Spot.U.s, where money directly changes hands, is the same as reporting any story for Wired.com. For Spot.U.s, the ethical promise inheres in the transparency of the funding. In traditional reporting, my ethics supposedly remain uncompromised because of the opacity of the firewall between our advertising sales team and me. But that firewall is narrow; it doesn't take much to peek around and see the inner workings of the machine staring back at me from a set of Shell ads deployed on my stories about climate change.

Granted, with my ethanol story, I had it relatively easy. I only made \$250, and the story I was trying to

tell wasn't really about the good or evil of ethanol. It was about how the ethanol system works—illuminating facts about government regulations, the number of unit trains carrying ethanol, and future mandates. This left open further debate about the substance's merits.

I wasn't investigating the Oakland police shooting of Oscar Grant, that's for sure. But the principles that I had to hold close—that journalists and fact finders of all stripes have to hold close—remained the same. Get my boots on the ground and ask people who know. Follow my nose for the truth. Don't trust everything I'm told. Act in good faith. No matter who paid for what, those who read the product depend on an individual reporter and his or her conscience to report the truth.

If we lose faith that reporters can do that, we've got bigger problems than crowdfunded investigative journalism. ■

*Alexis Madrigal reports on energy and science at Wired.com.*

# A Digital Vision of Where Journalism and Government Will Intersect

‘... the journalistic process of assembling information and connecting the dots to inform tough questions will be easier.’

BY BILL ALLISON

Soon after I came to work for the Sunlight Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit that uses the power of the Internet to bring greater transparency to government, I started to investigate the connection between a multimillion dollar Illinois highway project and some land owned by U.S. Representative Dennis Hastert, then the Speaker of the House. Applying tried and true investigative techniques from my time spent at The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Center for Public Integrity, I cultivated local sources, dug through public records, accumulated copies of deeds, plat maps, and Illinois Department of Transportation road plans. In time, I was able to determine that the cryptic “1/4 share in 69 acres (Plano, IL)” Hast-

ert listed on his 2005 financial disclosure form was a parcel of property a few miles from a proposed exit along the route of a highway project called the Prairie Parkway.

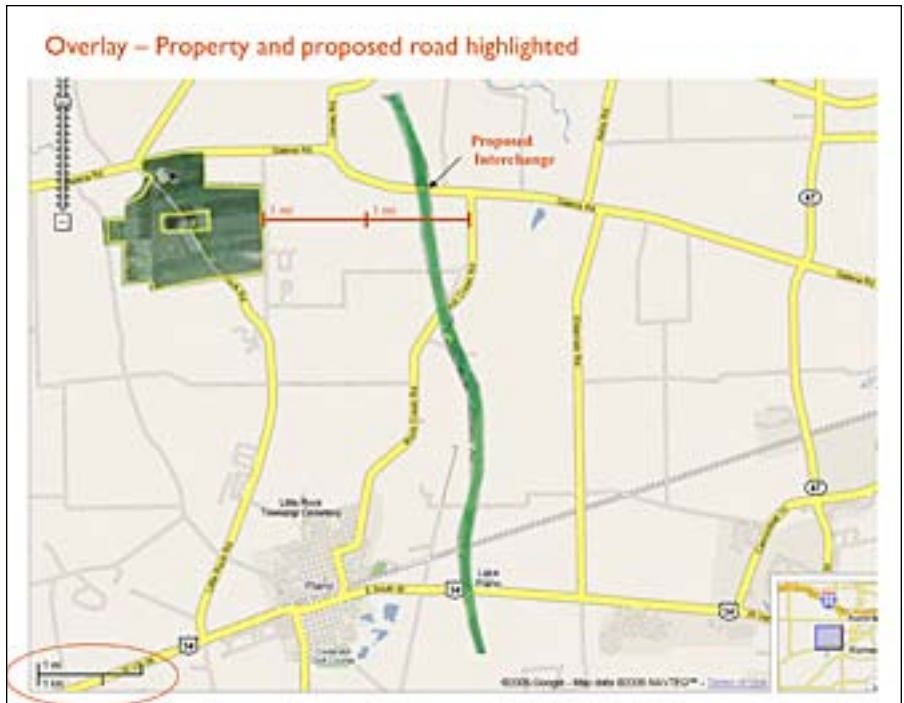
Hastert had funded the parkway with a \$207 million earmark that, thanks to his powerful position, he was able to insert at the last minute—with no review by his colleagues—into the 2005 transportation bill, known by the acronym SAFETEA-LU. A few months after securing funding for the highway, he sold his land to a real estate developer, making a neat two million dollar profit on property he held for less than a year.

The Sunlight Foundation published a story showing how the House speaker personally benefited from his legislative handiwork.

## Digital Public Access

A few months later, Andrew Rasiej, one of our senior technology consultants, gave a talk to a group of state and local politicians about Sunlight's mission and work. He mentioned all the digging and meticulous spade-

work Sunlight used to break the Hastert story. Then he asked the audience to imagine something different: Suppose that the paper financial disclosure forms on which members of Congress each year must list their financial assets, debts, transactions and sources of income were instead



On the day Allison posted his story, a reader combined three maps to create this one, which illustrates the proximity of Hastert's property to the Prairie Parkway project for which he earmarked funds. *Image created by Tony Tyner.*

put on the Internet with technology that made the information easily accessible for members of the public to view.

In this scenario, Hastert would not have listed a “1/4 share in 69 acres (Plano, IL.)” on a piece of paper filed away in the basement of the Capitol. Instead, his financial disclosure form would include a Google map showing the exact location of the land he owned. (It’s worth noting that ethics rules require members to disclose the location of property they own “sufficient to permit its identification, e.g., street address or plat and map location.”) Similarly, instead of the bland “U.S. I-80 to I-88 North-South Connector” line item in a transportation bill conference committee report, that \$207 million highway earmark would also be put on a Google map, complete with the name of its sponsor and the amount of taxpayer money committed to it.

If this happened, anyone could overlay on a single map the two sets of data and see all of the nation’s road

projects funded by congressional earmarks and all real estate investments of those same members of Congress.

Put aside the obvious hurdles for a moment—chief among them government’s reluctance to publish data in user-friendly formats. Try to envision what reporting would be like with lots of mashed-up (easily linked) data sets floating around.

What if digitized data and online reporting tools allowed reporters to cross-reference regional unemployment numbers, housing foreclosures, and bank reports to the FDIC with localized spending transactions from the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and the stimulus bill in only a few minutes? Very quickly, data-driven stories would emerge; one might be about a large, politically connected bank based in one city us-



ing TARP funds to expand by buying up smaller, sound banks in other cities that had avoided writing risky mortgages. Or perhaps an enterprising reporter would find that while her metro area suffered through double-digit unemployment, the bulk of the federal aid coming in was directed not to joblessness benefits and retraining, but to restoring footpaths in area parks.

We're getting closer and closer to this being able to happen every day. Public demand for government transparency—for easy access to basic information about how government does everything from spend money to count votes—has never been higher; John McCain and Barack Obama pledged greater government transparency during their presidential campaigns. Meanwhile, new and improved technologies are putting more information at the fingertips of reporters faster than ever before.

## Applying Technology to Journalism

Machines can translate paper documents into electronic formats, allowing reporters to quickly search them for key words and phrases. When the Senate released the hundreds of

pages of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act—the bailout bill—in 2008, Sunlight parsed the document and put it on our Web site (PublicMarkup.org) the same day. Its searchable format allows users to quickly navigate and even annotate the document. Now, in 2009, as Congress considered the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—better known as the stimulus bill—an ad hoc coalition of government watchdogs and fiscal conservatives did the same thing as fast as we did without our help on a site called ReadTheStimulus.org.

Web-based platforms now exist for building databases and cleaning data that nonspecialists, of whom I am one, can use for free. I built a pair of databases using Dabbledb.com; a simple one listed donors to Bill Clinton's presidential library. A more complicated one tracks congressional sponsors, beneficiaries and lobbyists of various trade bills that reduce tariffs (that is, taxes) on specific imported items for specific companies. Visualization tools let even an artistically challenged guy like me plug a bunch of numbers into a site like IBM's Many Eyes and see trend lines on a graph, concentrations on a map, or pick out the really big numbers using a bubble gram.

As tools become more sophisticated and more data become available from government—and perhaps the private sector, if greater transparency is required from banks and corporations in the wake of the financial crisis—the investigative benefits experienced through computer-assisted reporting will become the norm. Access to data and easy-to-use tools to show quickly what it means will let reporters question those in power by bringing with them a tremendous amount of empirical information. And as reporters look for trends in their communities, they will be able to sort through much more data than they now can and use it to spot them.

None of this means it will be any easier to get a politician under the spotlight of scrutiny to answer a tough question. But the journalistic

process of assembling information and connecting the dots to inform tough questions will be easier. By learning when and how to use these tools, journalists will no doubt be able to produce more substantive and informative stories, and they can do so at a time when the financial resources available for this kind of reporting are diminishing. ■

*Bill Allison, a senior fellow at the Sunlight Foundation ([www.sunlightfoundation.com](http://www.sunlightfoundation.com)), was an investigative journalist at The Center for Public Integrity for nine years after working at The Philadelphia Inquirer as a researcher for Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporters Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele.*

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Nieman Reports is online at: [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org)

# Tracking Toxics When the Data Are Polluted

How computational journalism can uncover what polluters would prefer to hide.

By **JAMES T. HAMILTON**

**E**ach year the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) program releases information from more than 20,000 plants on their self-reported emission and transfer of nearly 650 chemicals.

In the early years of the program, the failure of a plant to file a TRI report arose more from ignorance about the reporting requirements than evasion of the law. Those guilty of nonreporting tended to be small facilities releasing small amounts of toxics. The pollution reports did attract attention from investors, causing stock prices for some firms to decline when the data became public. For companies releasing carcinogens into the air, plants whose emissions generated higher than expected cases of cancer ended up reducing their emissions more.

But the nature of the surround-

ing community affected these decisions. The higher the voter turnout in an area around a plant, a proxy for residents' political power, the greater the facility's reported reductions in air carcinogens. Yet not all the reports of pollution reductions may be real. When you compare TRI reports of pollution releases with actual measures of nearby pollution, for heavily regulated chemicals such as lead and nitric acid it appears that firms are not accurately reporting their emissions.

It took me more than 10 years of study to generate these results about the TRI program, which are summarized in my book "Regulation Through Revelation: The Origin, Politics, and Impacts of the Toxics Release Inventory Program." Originally, to study the TRI I had to stay up late at night so that I could mount large tapes on a university's

The screenshot shows the EPA's Environmental Justice Geographic Assessment Tool. At the top, it says "U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY" and "Environmental Justice Geographic Assessment Tool". There is a search bar with "All EPA" and "This Area" options. Below the search bar, there are instructions for using the tool. The main form area has several sections: "Select State:" with a dropdown menu showing "Alabama", "Alaska", "Arizona", "Arkansas", "California", "Colorado", "Connecticut", "Delaware", "District of Columbia", "Florida", "Georgia", and "Hawaii"; "Select City:" with a dropdown menu; "Select Watershed:" with radio buttons for "Subregion" and "Catalog unit"; "Enter ZIP Code:" with a text input field; "EPA Region:" with a dropdown menu; "Enter Latitude And Longitude:" with radio buttons for "Decimal Degree Format" and "Degree Minute-Second Format", each with "Latitude:" and "Longitude:" input fields; and "Facility:" with a radio button for "Continiguous USA". At the bottom, there are "Zoom to Chosen Geography" and "Clear" buttons.

**Tools found on this EPA Web site enable people to find polluting facilities in their neighborhoods. In the future, algorithms could use this information to “write the story of your local environment.”**

**—J.T.H.**

mainframe computers and run regression analyses when computer time was relatively cheap. Now the TRI data are freely available online at [www.epa.gov/tri](http://www.epa.gov/tri), and the calculations that took me days can be done with a click on the EPA site. The easy availability of data makes the TRI a likely source for environmentalists, community groups, and regulators.

Journalists have also used the TRI since its inception. USA Today ran a

series when the TRI data were first released in 1989 based on a three-month investigation and extensive computerized analysis. The rapid advances in computer power, data availability, and algorithms mean that TRI data may now serve as inputs into a newly evolving form of reporting—computational journalism.

I view computational journalism as the combination of data, algorithms and knowledge from social



science to yield information that can supplement and, in the future, substitute for part of journalism's watchdog function. By supplement, I mean that analyses like text mining and cluster analyses can generate electronic tips that lower the cost to reporters of deciding what and where to investigate. By substitute, I mean that eventually some watchdog articles will be written by algorithm in a way that would allow readers to see a customized, personalized article about how a policy problem is playing out in their neighborhood, block or lives.

How might this work? Consider how a reporter could investigate the local chemical data provided by the TRI.

**Statistical Analysis:** Some numbers follow Benford's Law, which means that if you look at the distribution of first digits, 1s outnumber 2s, which outnumber 3s, and so on. Work in forensic accounting shows that when people fudge their numbers they forget to do it in a way that replicates Benford's Law. This means that analysis of first digits is a way to check the accuracy of self-reported data. In looking at the actual level of pollution near plants reporting TRI emissions,

Scott de Marchi and I found that for the chemicals such as lead and nitric acid, the measured pollution concentrations around plants followed Benford's Law. But the self-reported data did not. This suggests that for these two heavily regulated chemicals, TRI reports may not be accurate. The TRI form actually provides a name and phone number if the public has questions about a plant's reports, which could be a starting point for reporters investigating the accuracy of TRI data.

**No change:** If facilities are not serious about their pollution estimates, they may fall back on a simple rule of thumb—simply report the same pollution figures each year. I got the idea for this test after reading David Barstow and Lowell Bergman's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of workplace injuries and deaths at McWane manufacturing plants. Thinking that a company willing to violate workplace regulations so egregiously would not be likely to invest much time in estimating its pollution releases, I looked and found that TRI reports at McWane at times simply remained the same from one year to the next. When de Marchi and I checked nationwide, we found

that plants where pollution levels stayed the same across years were likely underreporting their actual emissions. Journalists looking for underreporting can start by seeing which local polluters report the same figures year to year.

**Visualization:** I have found across environmental programs that even after you take into account income and education levels, areas with higher voter turnout get better levels of environmental protection. The higher the voter turnout in an area, the greater the reduction in air carcinogens, the more stringent the Superfund cleanups at hazardous waste sites, and the lower the chance that hazardous waste processing capacity will be expanded in the area. One way for online news sites to show the relation between pollution and politics is to show how voting rates differ around polluting facilities. In a state such as North Carolina, you can purchase from the State Board of Elections the voter registration file for the entire state for \$25. This shows the addresses of registered voters and whether they turn out at the polls, too. Voter address data can be used to create maps that show how political activity varies across streets and neighborhoods.

**Mapping:** The TRI forms provide the address for where polluting facilities ship their toxics for disposal. The records generated by the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act contain similar information for where nonmanufacturing firms send their waste. In my environmental policy classes, we track where (radioactive) medical waste from Duke ends up. Such data would allow reporters to show whose toxics are ending up in your local area and what neighborhoods in the United States end up receiving waste shipped from your area.

**Matching:** To find people who should have reported TRI emissions but did not, regulators initially compared local business directories and manufacturing lists with the facility name and addresses of TRI filers. In some industries, the production process almost by definition would entail the release of particular chemicals. The easy availability today of detailed information on plants and facilities makes this a matching process that journalists can conduct on their own. This would be especially helpful in discovering violators when programs are new and word of requirements has not traveled widely.

**Personalization:** Right now the EPA collects pollution data from multiple programs into the Envirofacts database and merges environmental data with community information in the EnviroMapper function. In the future, algorithms could take this information and write the story of your local environment, letting you know likely exposures from different facilities, types of enforcement actions recently taken at nearby plants, trends over time in local public health, pictures of emitting facilities, and how these pollution patterns compare across time and across other areas in your city.

Data from the TRI can at times be controversial, imperfect and (strategically) slanted. Yet as the field of computational journalism develops, the use of algorithms and knowledge from social science should allow reporters to use data such as the TRI to lower the cost of generating watchdog coverage and raise interest in political issues by personalizing the impact of public policies. ■

*James T. Hamilton is the Charles S. Sydnor Professor of Public Policy Studies at Duke University and the director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy.*

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## 21st Century Muckrakers: Who Are They? How Do They Do Their Work?

Watchdog reporting resides at the core of what journalism does. Its roots dig deeply into the common ground uniting the muckrakers' unearthing of public and private scandals a century ago with what investigative reporters are illuminating today. Though reporting and distribution of this news is very different in the digital era, unfortunately the human conditions requiring press scrutiny are not. These include patterns of corruption and malfeasance among those holding powerful positions of public and private trust. — Melissa Ludtke, Editor

# Investigating the Pharmaceutical Industry on a Blog

‘... evidence itself often emerged as the centerpiece, which has a strong impact on the audience when they see for themselves the incriminating paper trail.’

BY ED SILVERMAN

Two years ago, I began a grand experiment on the Internet—I launched a blog called *Pharmalot* to focus on the pharmaceutical industry, which I had been following for more than a decade for *The Star-Ledger* in New Jersey. There were several reasons I did so: The newspaper was looking for ways to embrace and exploit the Internet, and I was interested in getting ahead of the curve by finding new ways to cover my beat.

The gambit worked. Nowadays, reporters meet some of their best sources online. Take the case of the disgusted sales representative. I encountered this person after posting an item on *Pharmalot*, which I ran full time with up to 10 newsy posts every day. Some were grabbed from other media, providing links to the original story; other stories, I generated myself. The blog’s audience

was diverse, although they were drawn to it by an interest in news about the pharmaceutical industry. Comments often developed into informative discussions and heated debates among people both in and out of the business.

One day, a person commented about a Pfizer item. These remarks clearly demonstrated that this person had inside information about sales practices, so I asked this anonymous commenter to send me a private e-mail in hopes of learning more. A few days later, an e-mail arrived, and we began a correspondence that led, in time, to telephone conversations. Still, for weeks I didn’t know this person’s true identity, and for a while I was unable to verify many details I was being told about allegedly illegal marketing activities for an HIV medicine.

Eventually, I gained this person’s

trust. And that's when the documents began to arrive in my e-mail box—dozens of them. Some were internal e-mails and memos, others were company manuals and presentations from meetings. More time was spent on the phone digesting all this material and then placing it in chronological order to tell a complicated story about employees who stretched rules that appeared to violate Pfizer policy and, more importantly, a corporate integrity agreement with federal authorities.

In some ways, this approach to investigating a story was similar to what I'd done when I reported on these same topics for *The Star-Ledger*—meet sources, gain their trust, research information received, then flesh out the story. What made this different was not so much how I reported the story but how I was able to tell it. On my blog, once I had verified that the documents were authentic, I used them—in their entirety—to illustrate the marketing violations, which Pfizer acknowledged were being investigated.

Each post in my three-part series contained a few introductory

paragraphs that offered a brief, narrative setup explaining the background and significance. After that, I let the reproduced documents do the rest; their mere presence was powerful enough to convince visitors to my blog of the problems my story highlighted.<sup>1</sup>

## The Value of Quick Hits

This story describes just one way that Pharmalot altered my approach to investigating and disseminating news. I was no longer confined to the conventional structure of a news story that relied heavily on narrative, despite the importance it has in explaining context and fleshing out an interesting tale. Instead, evidence itself often emerged as the centerpiece, which has a strong impact on the audience when they see for themselves the incriminating paper trail.

I also tried to write stories in a way that they can be told over the radio. By doing this I returned to a more conversational style that connects with people in a way that the dispassionate newspaper tone often fails to do.

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<sup>1</sup> One of Silverman's stories in his series about Pfizer and AIDS drugs can be read at [www.pharmalot.com/2008/02/new-aids-drugs-may-fail-after-inaccurate-test](http://www.pharmalot.com/2008/02/new-aids-drugs-may-fail-after-inaccurate-test).

Most of the stories on Pharmed were 300 to 500 words in length, and they rarely appeared as part of a longer series, as the piece about Pfizer did. I did examine other issues and spent days, even weeks, compiling substantive posts (exceeding 1,000 words) that have resembled the sort of in-depth piece that would appear in a Sunday newspaper. But most of time I investigated topics on a piecemeal basis.

Let me explain. When I wrote for the newspaper, a major story might later yield some interesting follow-ups. But often, what I might consider equally interesting tidbits rarely merited additional stories. The exception was a big event being closely followed by a huge audience. Most subjects, though, rarely warranted such an approach. Instead, those new pieces of information were destined to remain lodged in a notebook, just as colorful anecdotes sometimes get left on the cutting-room floor.

It turns out that Pharmed was a natural home for stories that one might not find in a newspaper. During 2008, for example, I spent a great deal of time closely following an on-

going investigation by the Senate Finance Committee into undisclosed conflicts of interest by academic researchers who simultaneously receive sought-after National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants and payments from drug makers for consulting, speaking or research. More than 30 professors, many at prominent universities, are targets of this investigation. Not surprisingly, this has been a long-running, national story in the mainstream media.

Through old-fashioned digging and sourcing, I broke the story of how one high-profile professor, Brown University's Martin Keller, is being investigated by the Senate Finance Committee.<sup>2</sup> I was also able to get other scoops by looking for sources who would provide information about other professors; these blog posts shared with readers my reporting on important developments. For instance, after one national newspaper broke the story about the committee investigation into a Stanford University psychiatry professor, I continued to post more items that raised questions about his grant, specifically about

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<sup>2</sup> To read this blog post—including links to a deposition and e-mails relevant to the story, go to [www.pharmed.com/2008/07/grassley-targets-browns-keller-over-grants](http://www.pharmed.com/2008/07/grassley-targets-browns-keller-over-grants).

how Stanford and the NIH handled the alleged conflict of interest being probed by the Senate committee.

By posting a few relatively short items—each given prominent space—I was able to convince additional sources to cooperate with me. Meanwhile, despite the initial widespread attention paid to this story about this

Stanford professor, most in mainstream media largely stepped back from continuing coverage. And just one other blog spent any time doing investi-

gative reporting. As a result, I broke the story that, under pressure from the NIH, Stanford reassigned the grant to another professor.

To an extent, I have to confess that I relied on my tabloid instincts in such situations. A quick hit can satisfy enough appetites for those hungry for more information about a juicy story. Having this flexibility to post about an e-mail here or a medical study there made it possible for me to stay in the game and attract readers and

sources who cared about the topic.

Pharmalot, however, closed earlier this year, after I reluctantly took a buyout. Like other newspapers, The Star-Ledger was experiencing such severe financial conditions that at one point the owners said closing down was a possibility. It was a difficult decision, in part, because

the blog had grown so popular—more than 11,000 daily visitors and 330,000 monthly page views. The size of the audience made it clear that there is tremendous

interest in my approach to coverage. And in case you are wondering, I accomplished this without having to leave the house very often. ■

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**A quick hit can satisfy enough appetites for those hungry for more information about a juicy story. Having this flexibility to post about an e-mail here or a medical study there made it possible for me to stay in the game and attract readers and sources who cared about the topic.**

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*Ed Silverman was editor of Pharmalot (www.pharmalot.com) which was owned by The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. He covered the pharmaceutical industry for the newspaper for more than 11 years before launching Pharmalot and now works for Elsevier Business Intelligence.*

# Blogs, Watchdog Reporting, and Scientific Malfeasance

‘Bottom line is that it takes time and money to do the kind of muckraking that newspapers have always excelled at, and I’m not sure the blogosphere can reliably reproduce this all-important function.’

BY ALISON BASS

One afternoon, when I was a reporter for The Boston Globe, a cryptic message found its way to my desk. A woman who called the paper had left her phone number and a message having to do with the misappropriation of funds from the state mental health agency. As the paper’s mental health reporter, I received the tip.

It was late in the day and, having just filed a daily story, I almost didn’t return the call. But I did, and a person identifying herself as Donna answered. She sounded wary at first but warmed as we chatted; she knew my byline and told me she liked reporting I’d done on recent cutbacks in services for the mentally ill. She let me know that she was the assistant administrator of research for Brown University’s department of psychiatry and had in

her possession documents proving that her boss, the chief of psychiatry at Brown, was collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health for research that apparently wasn’t being done.

And Donna Howard had other allegations to share with me that day. She also suspected that researchers in Brown’s psychiatry department were misrepresenting data for two clinical drug trials, including one study on Paxil for treating depression in adolescents. As we spoke that day, I remember typing quick notes with my phone cradled to one ear and thinking to myself that this can’t be true. She agreed to meet with me the next day at a Burger King halfway between Providence, Rhode Island, where she worked, and Boston.



Everything she told me that morning was backed up by extensive documentation and confirmed in interviews with other sources. During the next several months, I wrote a series of front-page articles for the *Globe* about research and billing transgressions by Brown's chief of psychiatry.

More than a decade later, Algonquin published my nonfiction book, "Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower, and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial," which tells the story of two women (Howard being one of them) who exposed the deception behind the making of the blockbuster drug, Paxil. My book lays bare the longstanding complicity between prominent academic psychiatrists and the pharmaceutical industry and reveals disturbing flaws in the way drugs are tested and marketed.

## Blogs and Investigative Reporting

"Side Effects" could not have been written without the investigative reporting I did for *The Boston Globe*, which brings me to a major

point of this essay: The best muckraking of recent decades has been done by reporters who worked for metropolitan dailies with the resources to support their reconnaissance. Other news outlets, including public radio and broadcast and cable television, rarely do their own skunk work and, with a few exceptions, piggyback instead on stories that newspapers unearth.

Now, however, such investigative verve has largely disappeared from newsrooms around the country because financially strapped newspapers no longer have the capacity to fund this kind of intense, beat-driven work—outside the political arena, at least.<sup>1</sup> At regional newspapers like the *Globe*, health and science reporters are, for the most part, too busy filing dailies, posting online updates, and trying to avoid layoffs to take the time needed to meet with kooky-sounding anonymous sources at Burger King.

Some optimistic media observers say the crucial watchdog role of newspapers is being subsumed by blogs, and there are certainly a few blogs that have made a splash in

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<sup>1</sup> See article "The Ties That Bind: Newspapers and Nonfiction Books," by Melissa Ludtke, in the Winter 2008 issue of *Nieman Reports*, at [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org).

the investigative arena. I'm thinking here of Talking Points Memo, Pharmalot, and Smoking Gun as well as some local news blogs like voiceofsandiego.org and the New Haven Independent. [See article about voiceofsandiego.org on page 18.] I also write a blog, <http://alison-bass.blogspot.com>, where I report and comment on health care issues. As a long-time journalist, doing this keeps me abreast of important developments in health care, and I get to think aloud about the ramifications of these developments. And my blog has led to invitations for me to write opinion pieces for bigger news outlets. On a number of occasions, my blog—and other independent ones such as Health Care Renewal and Furious Seasons—have inspired others to investigate and write about scientific malfeasance. Indeed, I find independent-minded blogs often work best in tandem with the mainstream media, which take their findings and amplify them for a larger audience.

There are, however, a variety of constraints on bloggers' ability to do investigative reporting. As a freelance journalist who pays my bills by teaching journalism at Mount Holyoke College, I have neither the time nor the resources to do the kind of digging I was encouraged to do at

the Globe. In writing my book, for example, I filed several FOIA requests with the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to retrieve public information about the way that agency worked with the pharmaceutical industry in vetting new drugs. The FDA—under the secrecy-obsessed Bush administration—responded by demanding that I pay hundreds of dollars in upfront copying fees before they would fulfill my requests, money I didn't have. Fortunately, I obtained most of the information I needed from other sources who had requested similar documents over the years and had deeper pockets than I.

Bottom line is that it takes time and money to do the kind of muckraking that newspapers have always excelled at, and I'm not sure the blogosphere can reliably reproduce this all-important function. In one particularly worrisome sign, the best and most reliable blog about the pharmaceutical industry—Pharmalot, a blog that regularly broke investigative news—went out of business on January 5th because its indefatigable pharmaceutical industry reporter, Ed Silverman, took a buyout from the financially strapped Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. [See Silverman's ar-

ticle on page 36.] Had the Star-Ledger truly valued the blog's investigative mission, it could have hired another reporter to continue what had become an internationally respected brand. Instead, this blog's dissolution leaves a big gap in the independent coverage of the pharmaceutical industry, one that other news-oriented blogs, such as the health blog of The Wall Street Journal, do little to fill. Pharmalot's demise augers ill for the future of investigative-minded blogs.

## Watchdogs on Capitol Hill

It is interesting to note that in one corner of the health care arena, a small team of government investigators has taken up some of the watchdog slack. During the past year, aides for Senator Charles Grassley, a ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, have uncovered extensive financial ties between prominent doctors and the pharmaceutical and medical device industries. Their findings—that some doctors repeatedly failed to disclose the millions of dollars they were being paid to promote industry products—have appeared in newspaper stories and in blogs around the country. As a direct result of these probes, the

National Institutes of Health has finally begun enforcing its own conflict of interest policy, and a number of universities, including Harvard Medical School, have said that they will stiffen or at least review their conflicts of interest policies for faculty researchers.

Such government investigations, however, are inevitably short-lived. Grassley's team is conducting these probes for the express purpose of bringing attention to the problem with the hope of crafting—and passing—legislation that would require the public disclosure of such conflicts. As has been proven throughout our history, our democracy cannot depend solely upon government to root out malfeasance, especially since wrongdoing sometimes involves government officials. This job, like it or not, has fallen to the press and, until America's newspapers invent a new business model to replace the dwindling revenue from print advertising and cover the cost of aggressive reporting, this critical mission remains in peril. ■

*Alison Bass is the author of "Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower, and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial," published by Algonquin Books in June 2008.*

# An Investigative Reporting Partnership: A Serendipitous Collaboration

‘At Northeastern University in Boston, where I joined the faculty in 2007, students in my investigative reporting seminars have produced 11 Page One stories for The Boston Globe in just 20 months.’

BY WALTER V. ROBINSON

It is a journalistic paradox. Newspapers and other media are shedding reporters and editors by the thousands, with worrisome ramifications: The press watchdog, so essential to a functioning democracy, doesn't bark as much or as often. Yet despite the newsroom carnage, journalism schools are brimming with fledgling reporters convinced that career opportunities in the news business are boundless.

In those crosscurrents, there is opportunity for collaboration in almost any city with a newspaper and a college or university journalism program. For news organizations that can no longer afford to do much enterprise and investigative reporting, journalism students eager for experience—and bylines—can help

fill the void. And their work can be overseen by journalism professors who most often have substantial news credentials.

At Northeastern University in Boston, where I joined the faculty in 2007, students in my investigative reporting seminars have produced 11 Page One stories for The Boston Globe in just 20 months. What's more, the university's School of Journalism has started a region-wide First Amendment Center to fight for public records for news organizations that no longer have the money to wage those battles.

This enterprise, however, is not for the academic faint-of-heart or for risk-averse local editors. But the potential rewards are well worth the effort: students learn report-

ing techniques that will help make them valuable postgraduate hires; newspapers find the extra reporting firepower a godsend. And there is a payoff, too, for a public justifi-

ably concerned about what the loss of in-depth reporting in so many newsrooms might mean for them.

My graduate and undergraduate students try to outdo one another

## A parking deal for the chosen ones

City-owned space used by the well connected



### A parking deal for the chosen ones

(NECN: Boston, Mass.) - For more than a generation, it has been perhaps Boston's most covert bargain, a city-owned parking lot in the North End where the lucky, the affluent and the politically connected had assigned parking for just \$55 a mo...

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By Kate Augusto and Matt Collette

Globe Correspondents / December 15, 2008

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**Matt Collette, a Northeastern University journalism student, talks on TV station NECN about his investigative reporting for a Boston Globe story in which he and another student uncovered a sweetheart deal for the politically connected in a city-owned parking lot.**

with their doggedness. In two successive semesters, students spent weeks poring through voluminous records in county courthouses as part of two separate investigations of the commonwealth's court system. One of those articles prompted reforms to protect the rights of the elderly. The second story forced the courts to change the way they treat adults who are developmentally disabled.

Last year, weeks of database reporting by two graduate students resulted in the exposure of a disability pension scam involving more than 100 Boston firefighters; those articles prompted an ongoing federal grand jury investigation. In another seminar, four students produced an exhaustive Sunday article about many Boston high-end restaurants that had been cited for serious health code violations by city officials who chose to keep the results private.

This Northeastern University-Boston Globe collaboration was not born of necessity. Although the Globe has made substantial staff cuts, Editor Martin Baron remains deeply committed to investigative reporting. Globe reporters routinely dig out important stories. And the investigative unit, the Spotlight

Team, has not been affected by staff reductions. When I was assistant managing editor for investigations at the Globe and worked for Marty, I ran the Spotlight Team. I left the paper after 34 years to teach investigative reporting, but I didn't want my students learning in a laboratory. Marty quickly realized the potential of a partnership. So, too, did Stephen D. Burgard, the director of Northeastern University's School of Journalism.

In Boston, there are so many investigative story prospects that even a standard-issue class assignment can bear fruit. One such assignment requires students to do soup-to-nuts public records scrubs on public figures to acquaint them with the myriad public records that can be plumbed for just about any story. Last year, in delving through those records, two students turned up a pattern of questionable business dealings by a top fundraiser for Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. The governor, the Globe subsequently reported, abruptly jettisoned the fundraiser when the Globe asked about the business dealings.

The university's New England First Amendment Center, formed in collaboration with a group of

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

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# Northeastern University



A partnership between the New England First Amendment Coalition and Northeastern University

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**New England First Amendment Center**  
 School of Journalism  
 Northeastern University  
 103 Lake Hall  
 Boston, MA 02115-5000  
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 (617) 373-4198

**New England First Amendment Coalition**

## First Amendment Hotline

### WHEN YOU NEED HELP

At the First Amendment Center, we are committed to using our resources, to include the expertise of our staff - and, when the need arises, first Amendment lawyers - to advise citizens, journalists and news organizations when they run afoul of public officials who block access to public records or meetings.

If you need our help, and cannot find the information you seek on our website, we urge you to contact us. Here are some of the ways we can help:

**OUR ADVICE.** Most often, the Center's staff director, members of Northeastern's experienced Journalism faculty or board members of the New England First Amendment Coalition can advise you on how to obtain the public access the law requires in your state.

**OUR ASSISTANCE.** If you need further help, the Center may lend its expertise to help you navigate your way through the Freedom of Information process.

**OUR BULLY PULPIT.** Our website is a region-wide attention-getter - for anyone who needs access to public information; for government officials, elected and appointed, who have to interpret public access laws; for opinion leaders who care about First Amendment issues; and for news organizations that monitor our website for egregious cases in which the public's access to its government is being illegally blocked. That means the Center's website can be a powerful tool when widespread public attention to a First Amendment issue is warranted.

**OUR LEGAL ADVICE.** When important issues of broad public import arise, the Center's advisory board of First Amendment attorneys will offer legal advice to protect our First Amendment rights.

If you need help, email us: [firstamendment@neu.edu](mailto:firstamendment@neu.edu). Or call the Center at 617-373-5120.

New England editors, is still in its formative stages. We have a Web site—<http://neu.edu/firstamendment>—that updates news on public records and open meeting law is-

ues. The center also hosts a hotline to help reporters fight for access to public records that make for important watchdog journalism. Few newspapers, however, can afford

to go to court to force the issue of obtaining critical public documents when access to them has been blocked. So our center has enlisted help from students at Northeastern University's School of Law. They've written the briefs. And with pro bono help from a First Amendment lawyer, we've filed our first lawsuit on behalf of a midsized Massachusetts newspaper.

Our modest start at Northeastern can be replicated by any adventurous journalism program. Journalism teachers need not limit themselves to wringing their hands at the plight of the news business.

Nor should students need to wait for newsroom internships or graduation to do reporting that gets published in a metro newspaper—reporting that makes a difference. And savvy newspaper editors ought to welcome the help. ■

*Walter V. Robinson is Distinguished Professor of Journalism at Northeastern University. For 34 years he was a reporter and editor at The Boston Globe. In 2003, he and his Spotlight Team reporters won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the Globe's coverage of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.*

NIEMAN REPORTS • WINTER 2008

## The Search for True North: New Directions in a New Territory

Just as the motor car replaced the horse and buggy a century ago, the vehicles in which news and information travel to reach their audience are shifting from print to digital, from television to hand-held readers. In this time of accelerating change, how journalists do their work and what elements of journalism will survive this digital transformation loom as questions and concerns. By heading in new directions and exploring the potential to be found in this new territory of interactivity and social media, journalists — and others contributing to the flood of information — will be resetting the compass bearing of what constitutes “true north” for journalism in our time. — Melissa Ludtke, Editor



# Long-Form Multimedia Journalism: Quality Is the Key Ingredient

As a producer of social documentary projects—viewed on digital platforms—Brian Storm talks about the excitement of doing journalism in this way, at this time.

*Brian Storm is the president of Media-Storm, a production studio located in Brooklyn, New York, which publishes multimedia social documentary projects at [www.mediastorm.org](http://www.mediastorm.org) and produces them for other news organizations. In an interview I did with Brian on December 30, 2008, he spoke about how he envisions the future of long-form, multimedia journalism from the perspective of its creation, distribution and economic viability. An edited version of our conversation follows.*

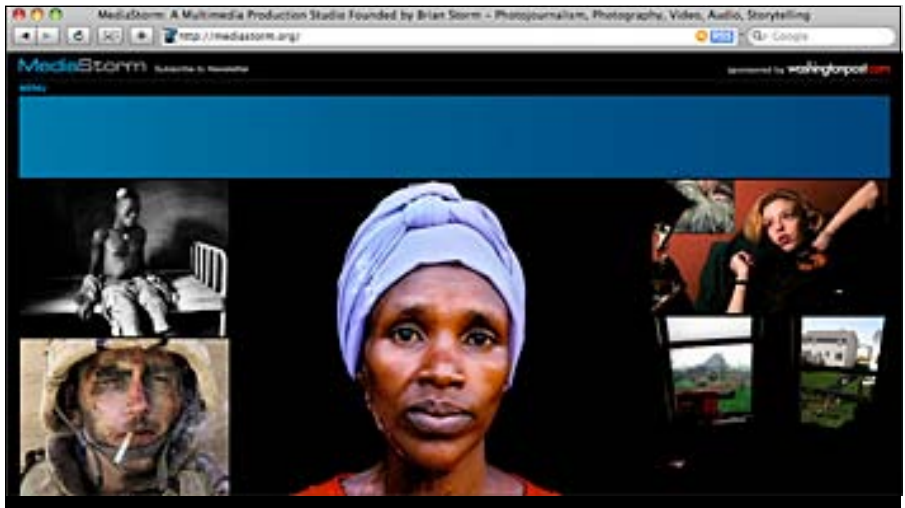
**Melissa Ludtke:** In a commencement speech that you gave in December to graduates of the University of Missouri School of Journalism,<sup>1</sup> you let them know

that you are optimistic and passionate about journalism. Can you describe where your optimism comes from at a time when we hear so much about the enormous challenges facing journalism and this despair being expressed by so many journalists?

**Brian Storm:** The journalism industry is not in despair, it's simply going through a redefinition. I feel like we're living in such an epic moment, a transformational moment. Think about the big stories happening right now: climate change, new president, and an economy that is totally falling apart, and as journalists, these are big stories. It's a great journalistic moment to be in this business. The big opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> Storm's commencement speech can be read at [www.mediastorm.org/blog/?p=512](http://www.mediastorm.org/blog/?p=512).



**MediaStorm describes its mission as ushering in the next generation of multimedia storytelling by publishing social documentary projects incorporating photojournalism, interactivity, animation, audio and video for distribution across multiple media.**

is that the tools are so powerful that anyone can create high production value content and distribute it globally. I don't need to own a printing press or a television station, but I can be on television through new distribution devices like Apple TV or TiVo. It's an absolutely revolutionary moment, and I feel incred-

ibly empowered as a journalist. As a storyteller, I feel empowered to do the best work of my career right now, even though I don't have the big mainstream media infrastructure sitting underneath me that I used to have.<sup>2</sup> Now I can do the kind of stories that I've always wanted to do without any limitations.

<sup>2</sup> Before he founded MediaStorm, he was vice president of news, multimedia and assignment services at Corbis, a digital media agency, and director of multimedia at MSNBC.com.

**Ludtke:** Let's talk about the other part of the equation—the passion for journalism. There is so much tension now, with journalists trying to find a way to earn a decent living using new media tools and distribution. Where do you see the passion fitting into that part of the equation?

**Storm:** I certainly can understand why journalists at big media companies are depressed. Their passion for journalism I don't think has changed at all. It's the business environment that is creating this chaos. Everyone is being asked to do everything and nobody is being allowed to do in-depth quality journalism.

**Ludtke:** Where do you see the passion that you bring to journalism emerging? You've talked about the difficulties and challenges that a lot of journalists are facing today. How do you see passion being imbued into this?

**Storm:** For years I've been saying it's time for us to take journalism back. To take it out of the business development role and back into the world of why we got into journalism in the first place. We have to remember

back to the time when we decided, "I want to be a journalist." Why did we want to be a journalist? Did we wake up one day and say, "I want to make a pile of money?" I don't think any of us did that. That's not what drives us. We're curious and want to learn about the world. It's an incredible gift to enter into someone's life and tell their story. What makes me passionate is that I feel now, even though the fiscal environment is way out of whack, the ability to do stories at the level that I always aspire to do them is here; it's right in front of us in such a profound way right now. With the ease of distribution and the powerful new production tools, journalists can practice their craft with independence.

**Ludtke:** You touched on this, but let me explore it with you a little bit more. In many newsrooms now, reporters are being expected to use a variety of new media tools. They're being trained in sort of a helter-skelter way to tell stories across several platforms on the Web, and also for many, still in print. Having this expectation of producing this kind of quality reporting with video, audio and print on stories seems very tough for them to meet. Yet at MediaStorm, your approach is very

different. Can you describe how you see multimedia storytelling working best to produce high-quality journalism?

**Storm:** You sneaked into your question the word “quality,” so I’d have to disagree with you on that. You said newsrooms are asking reporters and journalists to do everything, but the word ‘quality’ doesn’t come into that conversation. The phrase that comes into that conversation is “do more with less.” It’s not a journalistic decision; it’s not a decision being driven around telling better stories. It’s the decision being driven by creating stories in ways that are more economical, more fiscally responsible.

**Ludtke:** By having one person do more.

**Storm:** Yes. I don’t know one person operating at a high level who is an independent one-man band who is telling the kind of stories that you could tell in a collaborative environment. There’s just no way. In every project we do, several people collaborate to make that story happen: the designer, the producer, the executive producer, and the journalist who covered the story in the

first place. What we’re trying to create are universal stories that are not perishable. That’s the core element of our strategy. We publish a story in 2006, and a certain amount of people see it when it comes out, and the blogosphere takes over and they promote it like crazy; it’s all viral, all word of mouth. It doesn’t matter if you watch this story in 2006 or 2009. It’s still relevant and still a powerful story. Those are the kinds of stories that we’re looking for—projects that are not perishable but will endure for years. That’s a different editorial focus than a daily product, and it takes a team of experts with a variety of skills to pull it off at a high level.

**Ludtke:** Your training originally came in visual journalism, but can you talk a bit about how audio is best employed as a storytelling tool as part of visual media?

**Storm:** For me, audio has always been the extra element that helps make a story work. One of my favorite examples of this is a project about “The Marlboro Marine” from Iraq. His image became an absolute icon. Everyone in the world saw it; everyone perceived it as the macho, badass American. The reality is that



**“The Marlboro Marine,” by Luis Sinco, Los Angeles Times: This photojournalist’s picture of Marine Lance Corporal James Blake Miller became an iconic image of the Iraq War. This story describes how Miller tries to heal the scars of war and how two lives became connected by a photograph. See the project at [www.mediastorm.org/0020.htm](http://www.mediastorm.org/0020.htm).**

that’s exactly wrong. His life is an example of incredible posttraumatic stress disorder, which about 30 percent of our soldiers coming home are suffering from. Having [the Marine] James Blake Miller’s words with the pictures allows him to tell you the reality of the situation. It gives a context, and that makes the visual images much more powerful. In this case, we did an interview with the photographer,

Luis Sinco; this gives transparency to our stories. I want people to understand the kind of passion that these photographers have. The way we present this on our site, he is the backstory, but the engagement of the story and the way in which he interacts with it are compelling elements. We need to create more transparency in the way we do photojournalism so people have a better understanding of it.

**Ludtke:** Storytelling is something that humans have done since the beginning of recorded time, on cave walls, now in cyberspace. You've observed that the new media revolution that we're going through is not about some reinvention of storytelling or the journalistic creed. Ethical and accurate information will still rule. Instead, you talk about how much it is about the access people have to the powerful tools to produce and distribute the information through the interconnected global Web. Can you talk about how this ease of access is remaking the process by which news and information is being gathered and absorbed?

**Storm:** When everyone has access, that is disruptive and causes chaos. Access is the territory that journalists used to own and now they look at what is happening with the crowd. The crowd has access to these great digital cameras, to this incredible powerful publishing tool called the Web, and they have expanded the conversation. They have access to distribution that we, as professional journalists, have. This doesn't make me fearful; it makes me excited. That's democracy—to have more people, more input, and more access to different perspectives.

We, as journalists, also have to elevate our game. We can't keep doing things the way we've always been doing them. We have to get better as journalists. From my perspective, this actually helps long-form in-depth journalism since the crowd is less likely to go that direction. In fact, they're taking some of the burden off of us in producing and discovering the things that waste our time. For me, the larger question is why we are wasting our time and skills covering stories that the crowd is all over. Why are we, as professional journalists, allocating our resources for such daily, perishable stories? We should be allocating them for things that are in-depth, investigative and require the kind of expertise and professionalism that we have. We need to take a deep breath and remember all the things that we used to do, then reconsider given the new landscape and decide what is going to give us the most value over time. What is the role that we need to play? I don't believe that is day-to-day, perishable content. I think we need to be more in-depth, more investigative, and more robust in what we do. I know that over time, that will actually pay off. That has proven itself time and time again for us at MediaStorm.

**Ludtke:** You've talked a lot about a new breed of journalistic entrepreneurs. What you're doing at Media-Storm is a good example of how to be entrepreneurial in the new media era. Can you describe the key ingredients an individual needs to pair their interest in journalism with an entrepreneurial business model that will provide a foundation from which they can do it?

**Storm:** That's the core question. How do we practice the craft and make a living? For me, the element of entrepreneurship has to be there. There used to be the separation between church and state. I'm a journalist, and I'm not going to think about page views or advertising or business models; it's not my job. My job is to tell the story. That era is coming quickly to an end. We're all well aware of this. The legacy business model needs to be completely rewritten. The way in which media companies used to make money has changed, in fact, the way in which every company used to make money has changed. It's a revolutionary moment. We need to rewrite how we communicate with each other. That's a pretty big deal,

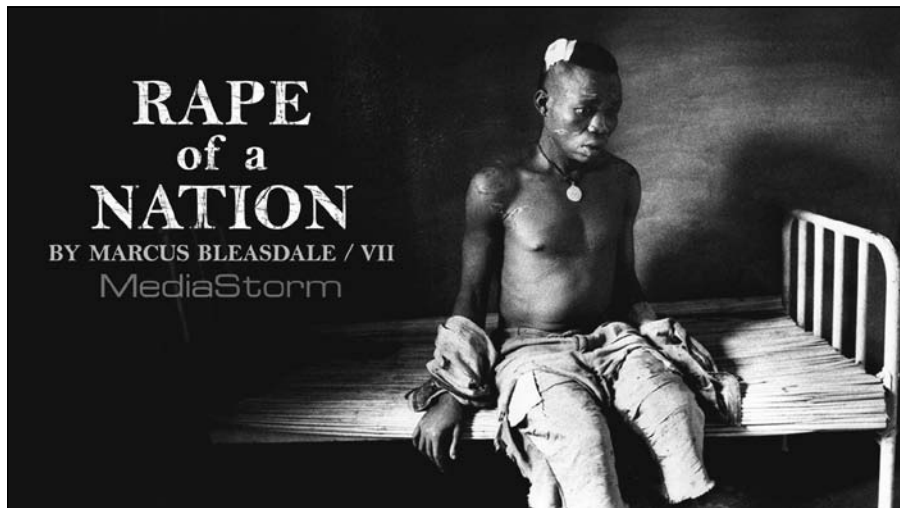
but I'm excited because in disruption there's opportunity. You have to look at the landscape, take what you care about, build on it, and then reinvent the other parts. That's why I think it's really important that the next generation of journalists have to be more entrepreneurial. I don't just mean that in a business sense; I also mean it in an outreach sense. Like how do we get our stories out there? How do we get the right people to get to the stories that we care about? That's entrepreneurial thinking. It's not just how do we go make money, it's also, how do we connect with the right people, how do we get involved with the right groups who can advocate for change? That's a big leap. At Media-Storm, we're focused on advocacy, not just information. We don't want to just create awareness with our stories, we want to create action.

**Ludtke:** More the need to find the right people, to find the agents of change.

**Storm:** Exactly. The story we've done with photographer Marcus Bleasdale is about the Congo.<sup>3</sup> The people who care about what's hap-

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<sup>3</sup> A Nieman Reports photo essay by Bleasdale in the Fall 2004 issue can be seen at [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org).



“Rape of a Nation,” by Marcus Bleasdale: The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to the deadliest war in the world today. An estimated 5.4 million people have died since 1998. These deaths are byproducts of a collapsed health care system and a devastated economy. See the project at [www.mediastorm.org/0022.htm](http://www.mediastorm.org/0022.htm).

pening there will find it, and they are already helping, and this is brand new. Ten years ago, this was impossible to do. Today, with a click of a mouse, it's off; one person can quickly spread this story, and it's not just one network. It's powerful. It's unbelievable, and it's driving awareness.

**Ludtke:** You use the phrase “surge of connectivity” to describe what

you see as the greatest hope for restoring quality journalism. At MediaStorm you don't publish on any set schedule, nor do you advertise the stories you publish, at least in traditional ways. Yet many of your long-form multimedia pieces find a global audience. Talk more about how this happens, giving an example of one of your projects growing its audience.



**Storm:** For the most recent project we published on Rwanda,<sup>4</sup> I sent an e-mail out to 11,000 people who signed up to receive our newsletter. The e-mail goes out, and there's a surge in traffic. Immediately, people start clicking the link, and over the course of several days traffic continually climbs, because a lot of those 11,000 people are forwarding that e-mail to their friends. And what is more powerful than you sending me an e-mail saying, "Brian, you have to look at this project. You've got to find the time to look at this thing"? It's the most powerful word of mouth marketing that can possibly happen. Your friends are trusted sources. They're helping to screen a massive amount of information that you have access to, helping to filter in the good stuff, which again is why I really believe quality is the key. If you just push out a bunch of drivel, no one is ever going to forward it to a friend. Over time, there's no payback on that. After the e-mail surge happens, then people start blog posting it; that is another really powerful thing, because we have people from 135 countries who come to our site every month.

That still just baffles me. People from all over the world come to our little Web site to watch stories, and the way they find it is e-mail, blog posts, and Tweets. Ten years ago, all of these ways for people to spread information didn't exist.

**Ludtke:** You've said your RSS feed drives 35 percent of your traffic to the Web site. And now you are saying Twitter accounts for a large amount of it, too.

**Storm:** Yes, Twitter went from nowhere, not even on our radar four months ago, and it is now number 11 in driving traffic to our Web site, which I just think is remarkable. Facebook is number seven.

**Ludtke:** What's number one?

**Storm:** Google. I think you would be hard pressed to find anybody who didn't respond to Google as their number one traffic driver.

**Ludtke:** Twitter is now number 11.

**Storm:** It's a remarkable thing to watch that grow. It just proved to

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<sup>4</sup> "Intended Consequences," by Jonathan Torgovnik, can be seen at <http://mediastorm.org/0024.htm>.

me that people care. It's so ironic. Ten years ago, I remember sitting in a newsroom and scratching my head, saying, "How do we get people to care about AIDS in Africa? How do we reach people with this story?" I remember everyone in the newsroom saying, "The audience is apathetic; they don't care." I felt that was wrong. They do care; of course, they care. They just need to have access to this stuff.

The irony now is that the apathy we're seeing is actually inside of the newsroom. The audience is totally energized, totally connected, and totally spreading around these powerful stories. But because of the crisis that we're going through, news organizations don't have the resources to do the kind of stories that I'm describing. People are asked to do less with more and not given the time. Time is the greatest luxury in journalism. It's why we don't publish on a deadline. We publish when we feel a project is ready. All of these things connect to each other and in really interesting ways to passion. What an exciting time to be practicing journalism!

**Ludtke:** Many of the stories on Media-Storm are lengthy, some more than 20 minutes. At a time when it's

said that people's attention spans are shrinking as they dash around from link to link, never stopping very long at any one site, why are you convinced that doing long-form journalism on the Web is viable as a business strategy?

**Storm:** The data tells me it's true. This is one of the things that used to drive me crazy when I was at MSNBC. Microsoft, its half owner, is a very data-driven, metric-centric culture. They look at numbers, so that is built into my DNA now. So that's what I do: look at our numbers on the dashboard. I can see how our publication is evolving—time spent on the site, where traffic is coming from, whose blog posts, who's spreading it for us. I have visibility in a way that is totally profound. I know so much about how our publication is and is not working, because the data are right in front of me. I think data can also be evil. A lot of people run around and say, "We need page views, we've just got to have video...." Sometimes they don't interpret the data correctly. Sometimes data can be used in a way that is not good.

For me, though, it's wonderful to have the ability to see how many people are watching our 21-minute



**“Kingsley’s Crossing,” by Olivier Jobard: A 23-year-old lifeguard from the impoverished town of Limbe, Cameroon, dreams of a better life in Europe. He embarks on a harrowing journey that takes him halfway across Africa, and photojournalist Jobard documents the passage. See the project at [www.mediastorm.org/0010.htm](http://www.mediastorm.org/0010.htm).**

video about a young African man’s journey to get to Europe with the help of smugglers. What percentage do you think watch 21 minutes from start to end on our site? The answer is 65 percent. That is an astonishingly high completion rate on the Web. When you think about it, it goes back to quality. The only reason they’re watching it is because it’s just a great story. We develop the character in a way that you start

to care for him, you see yourself in the character, and you’re hooked. You have to know: does he make it? And then, once he makes it, you say, “Holy smokes, he’s thinking about going back for real.” That is what we’re looking for, that universal, robust, in-depth coverage of an issue that people can relate to—immigration. A lot of people migrate; a lot of people leave their families in search of “a better life.” In Kingsley’s case,

it's still up for discussion whether his life is better or not.

**Ludtke:** We're going to link to your Web site and these projects you've mentioned so that people can see some of these stories themselves.

Can you describe some of the common threads that you see weaving together the various stories MediaStorm.org has published?

**Storm:** That's a really hard question, because I often get asked to describe what MediaStorm is, and it's going to sound weird, but one of my goals is for people not to be able to describe it. When people come to the homepage, it's not really clear right away what it is. A lot of news sites look exactly the same; they all have the identical template, design and aesthetic quality. I want people to come into our site and say, "What? I don't understand." They have to explore, and that's the idea behind the promos on the homepage; touch a project and see a little piece of the story. Every story is different

on our site; we don't have a specific editorial focus. There are not certain topics that we care more about than others. What I want people to do is try to start explaining the site, but then they get frustrated and say, "You should just go see it. It's really good. It's worth seeing." Those are the words I'm hopeful people will use. Those three sentences. "It's really good, and it's worth your time. Go see it." I think everyone will look at stories and take away different

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**We're trying to do stories that show life and help people better understand the complex world that we're in. It is complex.**

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things from them. There is no quick slogan. We've been called "the new Life magazine," or "the Life magazine of the Internet." That is a pretty awesome description, and I appreciate that people see it that way. There is a certain element of that that is accurate in terms of our aspirations. We're trying to do stories that show life and help people better understand the complex world that we're in. It is complex. I think the way in which we approach these stories helps to make those ideas more understandable and more accessible. ■

# Video News Reporting: New Lessons in New Media

‘What would it take to create good video journalism for online audiences, inexpensively and in an idiom that looked neither too homemade nor too much like TV?’

BY NICK PENNIMAN

In the fall of 2007, I spent a week doing what I would recommend to none of my friends: ceaselessly surfing YouTube. My goal was to find good, original video reporting. Not repurposed content from the news networks or indie channels, but pieces that had been produced for the Web.

At the end of the week, I felt jittery, nauseated and in need of a long jog. YouTube, the world’s TV channel, seemed to be nothing more than a grand wasteland. Instead of tuning out, though, I became obsessed. What would it take to create good video journalism for online audiences, inexpensively and in an idiom that looked neither too homemade nor too much like TV?

The result is the American News Project. We’re one of the only shops I know of that’s exclusively dedicated to creating original, inde-

pendent video journalism for the Web. [See the interview with Brian Storm on page 49 for another example.] We went live in June 2008 at <http://americannewsproject.com>, and since then we have aired more than 120 video reports that have garnered millions of views on thousands of Web sites throughout the world.

How have so many viewers found their way to our reports? We created a customized, embeddable video player in each of our reports and encourage people to take our content—for free—and show it anywhere they can. And so they do. A few of our pieces have even been rebroadcast on traditional television (CNN and ABC), and dozens more have popped up on satellite networks, such as Free Speech TV.

Working as collaboratively as possible with others who appreci-

ate the value of video, we've forged editorial partnerships with operations such as The Huffington Post and the McClatchy newspaper company. In our pieces, we've investigated troop malfeasance in Iraq, exposed the lack of transparency and accountability in the



**American News Project's Danielle Rose Ivory produced this video report, "Fed Lends Two Trillion Without Oversight."**

financial bailout, shined a light on the think tanks and lobbyists (and the pseudo think tanks funded by lobbyists) that hold sway over major policy decisions in Washington, D.C., engaged members of Congress in "big think" discussions about politics and policy, and even saved a woman's home that was headed for foreclosure.

The concept that helps organize our editorial thinking was best stated by my friend and mentor Bill Moyers when he said the job of journalists is to "uncover the news that powerful people would

prefer to keep hidden." But it's also that concept that, in part, makes our jobs particularly hard and has taught us most of our more difficult lessons:

### **Backpack journalism has limitations.**

Much is being made about the incredible potential of one-man-band (or backpack) journalism—in which one person researches, reports, shoots, edits and narrates each piece solo. Yet our experience tells us there are very few people who are great at all of these tasks. I've hired really talented people—pro-

ducers and documentary filmmakers who have worked for Frontline, CNN and National Geographic. Yet despite their know-how, it's hard for one person to embody all that's necessary for video backpacking. Good shooting is an art. Good editing comes from great visual storytellers who are also technically adept. Good narrating is part dramatic reading, part DNA (vocal tone, etc.). Add to all of this meticulous researching skills, a lively and natural interviewing style, an understanding of how Washington works and how to get out in front of news stories, and it's clear that these skills stand apart from one another and sometimes actually can work against each other.

Although many journalism schools are training even their print-oriented students to shoot and edit, we've found that the true backpacker who has a perfect balance of skills is a rare breed and that the field of TV/film is still divided among the skills sets. As a result, we spend more time than we originally expected teaming up staffers on pieces and having them bolster and train each other. Though backpack reporters will no doubt evolve in strength and numbers, there are few who can do it all.

**Meaty stories don't lend themselves to video.** It's hard to get exciting visuals out of the behind closed doors sausage-making in Washington, D.C.. Mostly we engage in muckraking journalism, reporting on the all-too-frequent intersection of money, power, politics and policymaking—a topic that is not inherently visual. There's a reason—not a great reason, but a reason—why so much TV news is junked up with stories about disasters and celebrities. Burning buildings, car wrecks, Paris Hilton, and Brangelina are easy to produce and make for good viewing experiences. Lobbyists, policy wonks, and Capitol Hill hearings don't.

Also, most people in the mix of policymaking either don't have time to sit down and conduct on-camera interviews or actively spurn coverage—especially with new independent outlets or when they fear that the resulting piece may be critical of them. Whistleblowers and anonymous sources simply don't like cameras. So once we have our reporting in hand, we do our best to make our stories more entertaining—with dynamic shooting, youthful music, and edgy narration that make our pieces fun to watch.

## Video is an arduous medium.

This means it's essential to think far ahead of the news curve. Even with all the new technologies—HD cameras that shoot directly onto hard drives, laptops with keen editing software, and relatively instantaneous Web distribution, making quality video reports takes time. It takes time to research, time to schedule on-

camera interviews, time to set up shots, time to shoot B-roll, time to acquire other visual elements, time to create graphics, time to write scripts, to narrate, to create a rough cut, then a fine cut, then a final cut, then encode, and then publish. We can turn a short piece around in a day if we need to. But, even then, we still get beat on some stories



**This scene of Tennessee's coal ash disaster appears in a video news story, "Kingston and Coal Lobby's Grip on the EPA," by Davin Hutchins.**

by the text reporters who are often publishing their pieces almost immediately after an event has occurred.

When we're not trying to crank out day-of stories, it takes us about 10 days to produce a two to eight minute video. We've had to kill about a quarter of our pieces because the news moved on before



we made it to the Web. As such, we have to constantly think way ahead of the news curve and anticipate what the news might be in two or three weeks. Or we have to make sure we're doing the stories that no one else would consider doing.

**There isn't money to be made doing this.** My operation is a nonprofit with an annual budget of about one million dollars, 75 percent of which goes directly to my eight employees' salaries and benefits. We've received about three million video views since we launched in June. That is, three million that we can easily calculate—there are others, because some of our pieces have appeared on TV networks. We don't sell ads on our videos. But, had we, we would have made about \$100,000 so far. That's obviously not enough to keep our operation afloat. Long conversation made short: Either online ad rates must significantly increase, or we all need to be actively working on forging hybrid nonprofit-for-profit models for journalism.

Something special is stirring in the new media world, and the American News project is only one small element in the grand mix. As one of

our advisory board members notes, online video reporting is forging a new idiom for journalism. It won't look like anything we've ever seen before on TV or in films and might help revolutionize what TV and films look like in the future. At times, it will be too sloppy for some who've grown accustomed to TV's polished pieces; for others who like to feel as if they've stumbled across something raw and elemental, it might not feel wild enough. At times, even the best reported stories won't get viewed because the eyeballs will be glued to the spectacles of disaster and celebrity.

But for the new viewers, and creators, a fresh future is stumbling to life. And I'm certain that, three or four years from now, if I repeat my YouTube immersion experiment I'll emerge not only satisfied with what I find but compelled to continue to spur on video's evolution, which right now has the feel of a revolution. ■

*Nick Penniman, who directed the American News Project, heads The Huffington Post Investigative Fund. He was Washington director of the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy and editor of TomPaine.com.*