

Small team, non-profit network

By Barry Johnson/10.2009

(Note: Barry Johnson is the arts columnist for [The Oregonian](#), but this paper was written outside that role, and it has no connection to the newspaper's policies or strategies.)

This paper will attempt to explain why a network of local journalism groups, each dedicated to a different topic or coverage area, might make sense as a strategy for preserving and extending the aspects of current journalism practice that we think important to save. The primary advantage of such a network is that it builds on what the internet does best -- the topic-specific site or blog. These are relatively inexpensive to start and keep going. They can network easily with each other and with other partners. They can respond to changing local conditions quickly, both in how and what they cover. And their funding strategy can also take advantage of local conditions -- motivated corporate, foundation and individual sponsors, paid services, memberships, etc. -- depending on the topic.

A second advantage is that the network can "roll out" site by site, which keeps the initial investment low. As we know, a full-service news operation is an expensive proposition, both to start and maintain.

We think potential problems with a network approach can be solved creatively. For example, making sure that best professional practices are followed could be more difficult than in a traditional, large-scale newsroom, but we think ongoing discussion of best practices and journalism ethics among the staff at various sites might lead to higher standards of transparency of method and starting premises, accuracy, and acknowledgment of the limits of the reporting for any given story. And individual groups might respond to persistent grammar and spelling errors in text by joining together to set up a "copy desk" of sorts to deal with longer projects.

We like the flexibility that smaller groups provide, too. A group devoted to the arts, for example, might produce more audio and video reports than one concerned with politics or health care. A group devoted to the environment might conduct more conferences or bring in more outside speakers for a lecture series than the arts group. The groups can be very different, depending on their skills and opportunities, not to mention imagination.

We like the idea that we don't have to pick "winners." A larger scale operation will inevitably choose among lots of qualified and interested journalists. Because the bar for starting a group is so much lower, we could conceivably have several groups devoted to politics, for example, without a centralized authority choosing their personnel. They would exist as long as they generated enough revenue to continue. The more revenue each group brings in, the more robust it might become. It might spawn other groups in the same area, or its success might encourage competitors. None of this would be "managed" by a central authority. If the need for professional journalism in the health care area, for example, is great enough to support a dozen journalists working in three separate groups, then those groups can begin and thrive without someone attempting artificially to balance the resource allocation.

Finally, we like the idea that any failure among the groups doesn't jeopardize the whole

network. In our imaginary circumstance of four political groups, for example, the failure of one wouldn't necessarily hurt the others, and it certainly wouldn't put the high tech group at risk. The failure of a central, large-scale news operation, however, would be catastrophic, at least over the short run.

I. General Interest

For elusive cultural reasons, "general interest" has begun to fail as a strategy. The old great variety television shows, "The Ed Sullivan Show" and "Laugh-In," are long gone. The magazine world is dominated by niche publications. Hollywood creates films with specific targeted audiences in mind, not the culture shaking, trans-generational epics of old. The Top 40 radio station is now a nostalgia platform, as music has fragmented into a hundreds of different sub-genres. We could go on.

Newspapers at this point remain resolutely general interest. They attempt to appeal to a broad readership by covering a wide range of topics. Implicit in this strategy is the idea that even if you, the reader, have no direct interest in the local NBA franchise, it's important for social purposes to have a little knowledge about the team's fate. Unfortunately, it's no longer necessary to read the newspaper for that shallow level of information. The websites of newspapers are hybrids -- they are structurally general interest, though they sometimes cover individual topics in some depth.

There are some successful sites that cover a wide variety of topics, though usually from an identifiable point of view -- Huffington Post, say, Daily Beast or Salon. But most of the most successful sites are intensely devoted to a small cluster of topics, often a single topic, and they are part of various unintentional overlapping networks of sites devoted to the same topic or sharing a particular political point of view. Some of these networks are intentional -- SB Nation, for example, links intense team-based sports sites, so a Portland Trail Blazer fan can easily link to a site of that night's opponent, the Sacramento Kings say, for similarly intense discussion of that night's game from the perspective of the other side.

In general, though, we internet users tend to go from site to site, led by our interests, which might inspire us to visit several architecture sites, for example, and then briefly hit a baseball site, the [New York Times](#) site for its culture coverage and the political site that's the nearest approximation of our own politics, which might link to Politico or a health care website. What we might expect of a general interest web site, that it keeps its visitors' attention for a long period of time as they wander around its offerings, doesn't happen. Newspaper sites keep their visitors for small amounts of time per visit, according to recent data.

II. Communities of interest

The reason for the existence for any of the small journalism groups we have in mind is a pre-existing community of interest. An arts journalism group only makes sense where there is a sufficient community to support and supplement it. The same with a health care group or an environmental journalism group. One unintended consequence (among the legions of unintended consequences) of the internet is that it has made apparent how many people are deeply interested in literature, say, how much they know about it and how eager for more information and discussion they are. The "wisdom of the crowd" idea, which we now take as a truism, only became apparent with the birth of the internet. The same with the idea of "crowd-sourcing." A journalism site that reports on local, geographically based matters, as opposed to tracking international developments in green-house gas research, say, depends on serving and engaging the local slice of its community of interest, though it also belongs to the network of groups and sites that deal with the same topic nationally and internationally.

Communities of interest vary -- in degrees of commitment, in partisanship (for a sports team, say), in numbers. We think its impossible to know in advance exactly what a particular community of interest is going to be like -- how a dedicated group of journalists can activate it, in what ways it's best to serve it, how it can support the journalists working for it. We think that depends on local conditions, the journalists themselves and the changing environment in which they are all situated.

III. An imaginary journalism group

For the sake of example, we will attempt to sketch what a journalism group might look like, how it operates and how it might be funded. We'll imagine a health-care journalism group, understanding from the above that this is an academic, not a real-world, example.

We'll assume the group has managed to secure non-profit status, has a board of directors and is fully functioning.

What is it covering? In our area, there are lots of possibilities.

1. Health care and public policy. The problems that lead to debates and decisions by local and state governments and agencies. This is a very large area to cover and likely would generate the most attention within the community of interest (health care professionals, citizens groups, administrators, the health care industry, the political class, etc.).
2. Local health care practices. How does the system deal with particular cases, issues and problems. Rarely covered now.
3. Alternative health care practices. A big slice of health care in our area is supplied by the naturopathic and other alternative health practitioners. It's rarely covered now.
4. Health insurance. Sorting out the local situation and how changes in the national environment might affect it.

5. Health and fitness. Best practices and available help in the area.
6. Mental health. A very large area, difficult to cover. (And possibly an area for a separate group.)
7. Research. The area produces a significant amount of scientific research of various sorts.
8. Your coverage ideas begin here!

OK. So let's set up some partnerships.

1. A local TV station wants help with #1 and #2. It's willing to pay a fee for news spots with video. It's also willing to pay for its pick of news items produced by the team for its website.
2. A public radio station wants to focus on #3 and #7 and is willing to pay a fee for audio reports and its pick of news items for its site.
3. A daily newspaper wants to choose from the daily report for its newspaper product and is interested in a recurring series on #5.
4. Newsletters produced by various professional organizations will pay for items that pertain to them.
5. Other non-profits and good government groups who want to tap into our expertise to set up conferences and forums on health care subjects.

And let's set up our own website. It doesn't have to be TOO fancy, unless you decide to go the membership route, which means your selling something through the site. Obviously, the more functionality you can afford, the better. But maintaining an elaborate site can burn lots of resources.

On the website, we attempt to follow best practices, meaning we...

1. Do what we do best and link to the rest (in Jeff Jarvis' words).
2. Post all our work in one place and archive it in an easily searchable manner.
3. Set up online forums and polls.
4. Call for information and reporting help from our community of interest.
5. Let our community know about upcoming events and conferences.
6. Sell our services.
7. Link prominently to other journalism sites that are NOT health care related. Build the network.
8. Make the case, consistently and frequently, for best-practices journalism in general and health care journalism in particular.
9. Help your community organize itself.
10. Whatever else seems appropriate.

Given our partnerships, we may be posting items to our own website after they are posted, printed or broadcast elsewhere. But there will be fresh stuff every day, even it's just in the form of aggregation posts. So, the work of the team is determined to a large extent by partnerships, by the form the journalism is going to take (audio report, newspaper feature story, etc., web report) and most of all by the community of interest's needs.

As you can already tell, we are looking for multiple funding sources. We're seeking grants from foundations that specialize in health care matters or journalism practice. We think we'll receive money from individual donors and sponsors who believe in the mission of the group. We are wary of direct corporate contributions because of conflict of interest issues, but in some cases maybe it's possible.

Some other ideas:

1. Those partnerships above.
2. Memberships. They make individual giving easier and they help define the community of interest a little better.
3. Those conferences.
4. Publications. We haven't talked much about print possibilities: How about a Dummy's Guide to Having a Baby in Oregon and other guide books that help consumers negotiate the health care system here; an annual that gathers developments in one place; other books that spin off of our coverage areas (particular stories, research breakthroughs, etc.).
5. Newsletters. The annual broken into monthly pieces with a public policy focus, say.
6. Documentaries (aimed at television and specific groups).
7. Again, your ideas here.

The appetite and resources of the community of desire will determine what specific funding routes the team takes. So will the abilities of the team itself. An excellent videographer, for example, may make the partnership with a TV station and documentary projects more possible and lucrative, for example.

IV. Networking and community involvement

As technology improves, the possibilities for better connections improve. We're thinking specifically of Google Wave right now, which allows for members of a community to comment/raise questions/correct a reporter as she is writing a story.

The technology isn't enough, though. Our health care reporting group understands that it has a stake in its own reporting -- in other words that its reporting has affects on the health care that group itself will consume. It should encourage in the specific health care community the values it brings to its reporting -- free inquiry and open debate, accuracy, transparency, an honest effort to describe situations, problems and events in increasingly useful ways and civility, among others. That means that the group is responsive to its community and its expressions of its concerns, its needs, its conclusions and opinions, honoring them by testing them with the same sort of rigorous scrutiny it applies in its own reporting. Ultimately, we believe that improving the quality of debate and discussion within the community is the best test of the success of the

journalism group, because we believe that's how progress is made in a democratic society. We think that one of the roles of the group is to mentor high-standards reporting outside the team, especially within its community of interest.

We are imagining the health-care journalism team as part of a network of other reporting groups. They don't have to be structured similarly. For-profit models (TV stations, newspapers, radio stations) should ideally be part of the network, too, though their rules of exclusivity sometimes make this difficult. The group should welcome any high-standards reporting group into the network, even competing health care reporting groups and link to their work whenever appropriate -- there is more than enough for everyone to cover.

We also imagine a "best practices" committee comprised of representatives from journalist groups, journalist/academics, and the public, which advocates for high standards and the preservation and extension of basic press freedoms.

V. Start-up and sustainability

We believe that it's crucial to ascertain the true costs of the teams and build them into requests for money, including the true cost of fair wages for the staff.

We don't think it's wise to begin without some partnerships in place and money for a year of operation for a small team. Pledges of money should be established before the team expands or attempts to widen its scale of activities (from part-time to full-time, for example, or adding a new component to the report).

To secure non-profit status, the group has to have a board of directors. We think assembling a board is a very useful way to start connecting with both the journalism community, the civic community, and the community of desire and that it should be taken seriously.

Although we think of these journalism teams (and, by the way, they could begin as teams of one) as ongoing, they could be assembled for particular problems and then allowed to close down. For example, when the battle over water in the Klamath Basin started heating up a few years ago, a team might have been assembled to report on the problem's various aspects and stakeholders (water, fish, migrating birds, tribes, farmers, environmentalists, etc.). As the issue began to wind down (as it has only recently), the team assembled to do reporting could move on to other things, as a team or individually.

We don't think there's a stigma attached to folding teams, though we'd like to see them take steps to ensure that journalism on the topic is encouraged, especially with partnerships to college journalism programs.

The make-up and number of each team is dependent upon resources and talent available. Because we are advocating LOTS of what used to be called outreach, education and partnerships, we suspect that successful teams might need an executive director (like other non-profits have) who may or may not be directly involved in the journalism. Or, a few teams might join forces to enlist someone to represent them, organize fund raising, secure in-kind contributions, etc. The

issue of leadership (and bad leadership) is sure to arise, even in small groups. We suggest that the structure of the teams be as democratic as possible, and suspect that training in collaboration and team building may have to occur before the team begins. We think boards of directors can also be useful in solving team problems.

VI. Implications of non-profit status

The final authority for the reporting group is the board of directors in a non-profit. This fact alone might lead journalists away from the non-profit model. Non-profit status has other limitations -- advocating for a particular political candidate, for example.

Nonetheless, we think the non-profit makes sense for lots of reasons.

1. It establishes that the journalism is a public good.
2. It disconnects the journalism, to a large extent, from conflicts of interest with large advertisers (though large funders can also be problematic -- another reason we like the membership model and seek lots of different revenue possibilities).
3. It suggests that there's a true cost for high-quality journalism that the community must pay if it wants that journalism.
4. It provides for a large number of revenue streams that the for-profit model doesn't have.
5. It makes the highest good the reporting of useful information and descriptions for the public, rather than profit.
6. It underscores the connection to the community.

VII. Links and further discussion

The best argument for the replacement of large, commercial centralized newsgathering operations with many smaller ones comes from [Clay Shirky](#), internet consultant and an adjunct professor in NYU's graduate Interactive Telecommunications Program. In a [recent speech](#) he said:

"So we don't need another different kind of institution that does 85 percent of accountability journalism. We need a class of institutions or models, whether they're endowments or crowdsourced or what have you — we need a model that produces five percent of accountability journalism. And we need to get that right 17 times in a row. That's the issue before us. There will not be anything that replaces newspapers, because if you could write the list of stuff you needed and organizational characteristics and it looked like newspapers, newspapers would be able to fill that role, right?"

It is really a shift from one class of institutions to the ecosystem as a whole where I think we have to situate the need of our society for accountability. The profit v. non-profit model debate has heated up lately."

Slate press critic Jack Shafer is a [non-profit model skeptic](#). The quotable quote in a recent post:

"For-profit newspapers lose money accidentally. Nonprofit news operations lose money *deliberately*. No matter how good the nonprofit operation is, it always ends up sustaining itself with handouts, and handouts come with conditions." He's talking about the large foundation donations that have kept some of the larger non-profit news sites (MinnPost, VoiceofSanDiego, etc.) in business. Our model is different and doesn't call for large-scale grants, but we suspect Shafer would be equally skeptical of any non-commercial newsgathering organization. Press analyst [Jeff Jarvis is also anti-not-for-profit](#), which give us some pause -- we generally think his sharp observations on the current media environment are entirely pertinent. Here's a response from [a reporter at MinnPost](#) and one [from John Thornton](#), the founder of the soon-to-go-live Texas Tribune to Shafer's position.

We are wary of the MinnPost model for reasons we've discussed above -- it mimics the general-interest newspaper and we are very skeptical that "general" exists anymore. We don't know what the demographics of the larger, non-profit sites are, but we suspect they are very much like newspapers, which is fatal in the long-term. The [recent experience of the Rocky Mountain Independent](#), formed out of the ashes of the Rocky Mountain News newspaper, is chastening. And so is the [fate of the smaller scale Chi-Town Daily News](#), which was also organized as a non-profit. It's possible that good commercial online businesses can be built from solid local reporting on government, health care, the arts, etc. We just haven't seen them yet. So far the successful ones (Politico, Talking Points Memo) have been directed at national government and politics. The big fear, Shirky suggests in his speech, is that journalism oversight will disappear in all cities of under 500,000 population, rendering them corrupt and un-democratic (which sounds like some American cities now). The 500,000 number seems arbitrary to us.

That said, we are impressed by a [new Bay Area initiative](#), primarily because it starts with lots of money and good partnerships (the graduate school of journalism at UC Berkeley and a large public radio station).

We haven't addressed the possibility that the big newspaper companies, especially Advance, which owns The Oregonian, will manage to turn around their fortunes. Various pay wall proposals have been made for newspaper sites ([here's Alan Mutter's](#)). There has been talk of government subsidies ([as in France](#)), and a [bill proposed by U.S. Sen. Benjamin Cardin \(D-Md.\)](#) would make it easier for newspapers to become and operate as non-profits. As we said at the outset, we work for The Oregonian at present, and nothing would be more in our self-interest. But even if The Oregonian can be preserved in its present condition, we believe that there is room and a need, especially in a growing city such as Portland, for non-profit sites.