



Summary of Meeting with Andrew Donohue

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, September 20, 2007

Guest speaker: Andrew Donohue, co-executive editor, voiceofsandiego.org

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus has been holding periodic sessions on the future of the media in the Twin Cities area and Minnesota. We've learned about new online efforts from Mary Turck of the Twin Cities Daily Planet and from Joel Kramer, who is planning MinnPost.com. Today we're learning about a similar effort in the San Diego, CA area that has been in existence for two years.

B. Introduction — Verne and Paul introduced Andrew Donohue, co-executive editor of voiceofsandiego.org. He has won local and national awards for investigative reporting, feature writing and breaking news. Most recently, his reporting on a dysfunctional affordable housing program won the national Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi award for investigative reporting online. A native of Milwaukee, WI, Donohue, 29, is a graduate of the University of Minnesota and interned with the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune's Washington, D.C. bureau during the 2000 elections.

C. Comment and discussion — During Donohue's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Conditions leading to the start of voiceofsandiego.org — San Diego has experienced serious loss of news coverage in recent years with the merger of the San Diego Union and the Evening Tribune. Further, the Los Angeles Times discontinued its San Diego edition. In 2004 the city had some political crises that weren't well covered by the Union Tribune. One of its most well-known journalists, columnist Neil Morgan, was fired. He got together with Buzz Woolley, president of the Girard Foundation, a private family foundation in the San Diego area specializing in K-12 education. Morgan and Woolley hired a consultant who helped them look at several models, print, online, profit and non-profit. They settled on establishing an online, non profit organization.

2. Breadth of news coverage — Donohue said that staff is very focused and disciplined in dealing

with a few areas very well and resisting the temptation to jump around and cover every possible topic. The voiceofsandiego.org concentrates on government, housing, environment, economics, education and sports in the San Diego region. After starting with a staff of two reporters at the outset two years ago, the staff now has eight journalists — two editors, five beat reporters and a multimedia/photo editor. Reporters are assigned specific beats. The city of San Diego makes up a very large portion of the region, so anything outside the city itself is evaluated very closely.

In response to a question Donohue said voiceofsandiego.org does not cover the Legislature nor suburban news. In a state as large as California, with the state capitol in Sacramento, it probably is a different situation than in Minnesota where the capitol is located in the state's one major metro area.

Depending upon availability of resources, at some point voiceofsandiego.org might cover the capitol, he said.

No one takes voiceofsandiego.org as his or her only news source. Virtually 100 percent of the audience also gets a daily paper.

3. Not a news aggregator — It was noted that many online news sites are aggregators, providing numerous links to other news sites. Donohue said voiceofsandiego.org does not function as an aggregator. Almost everything at its site is generated by its own staff. The only exception is opinion pieces by outsiders on its editorial page.

4. No "citizen" journalism — Donohue said voiceofsandiego.org believes very strongly in maintaining a high standard of quality in its news, prepared by professional journalists. It is that high standard of quality that distinguishes voiceofsandiego.com, and Donohue doesn't want to compromise by utilizing volunteer journalists along the lines of omynews.com, a successful online new site based in Korea.

5. Interest in public insight journalism at MPR — Donohue said Minnesota is fortunate to have such an outstanding organization as Minnesota Public Radio. He said he would like to learn more about how MPR uses citizens as sources for ideas—but not for writing—with its public insight journalism project.

6. Much more reader participation online — Donohue has been impressed that so many people feel free to send emails to voiceofsandiego.org when they read a story of real interest to them. When he worked at newspapers, he rarely got emails about the stories.

7. No fees charged — In response to a question Donohue said all access to voiceofsandiego.org is free. He noted that the New York Times has stopped charging for online access and he thinks fees will go by the wayside at the Wall Street Journal, too. Revenue comes from about 700 contributors, with approximately one-half of the revenue coming from significant gifts from philanthropists. A small amount comes from advertising, he said.

8. A six-day-a-week schedule — Every day, six days a week, at 6 p.m. the new edition of voiceofsandiego.org is placed online. However, the latest news is constantly updated at the top of the

website every day, in a section identified as "This just in". At the bottom of the website visitors can access the last four stories prepared in each area of emphasis, irrespective of whether the stories are the latest for that day.

9. Nature of the voiceofsandiego.org audience — The audience represents heavily educated and involved people in the community, probably not unlike the MPR audience in Minnesota. It's not a particularly young audience; most are in their 50s, he said. The website includes results of a subscriber survey in February 2007 that indicated 8 percent were between 19 and 24; 15 percent, 25-34; 40 percent, 35-54, and 37 percent, 55 and up. The survey revealed one-half had post-baccalaureate degrees.

10. Size of the audience — On a typical day about 14,000 different individuals visit the site, with each visitor spending an average of about 12 minutes at the site. Weekly, about 45,000 different individuals visit the site. The number of visits goes in spurts, depending upon whether a good story is available, when "the number of hits goes crazy". Certain stories will attract responses from throughout the nation. Interestingly, he knows that a few addicts are at the website almost constantly during the day.

Although the website is not given credit, Donohue knows that the Union Tribune picks up ideas for its own stories.

11. Nature of the reporting staff — Donohue likes young, hungry, talented, ambitious people who are recently out of college. They need the oversight of an editor, but they have lots of enthusiasm. Each reporter is expected to produce an average of three larger stories a week plus two stories in the "this just in" category. The site has lost only two reporters in two years, one of whom went back to school. In discussion it was noted that some other start-up websites are relying more on veteran reporters who were laid off from shrinking newspapers.

12. Local coverage is critical — The Union Tribune largely is made up of wire copy from national stories. You can get the best national material out of the New York Times, he said. What you need from a local outlet is good local coverage, and that is what has been missing in the printed press in San Diego. He senses that already the voiceofsandiego.org has stimulated the Union Tribune to do more investigative reporting.

13. Absence of a younger generation of readers — The voiceofsandiego.org doesn't make a special effort to attract younger people. People of Donohue's age (29) aren't reading the news; it's the reality of the market, he said. Voiceofsandiego.org readers are people who are really engaged in the community.

14. Always a need for the product — Commenting on an observation that the decline of the daily newspaper is inevitable, Donohue replied that there'll always be a need for high quality investigative journalism, even though the method of delivery might change from print to electronic.

15. For-profit versus non-profit — Traditional newspapers have lost their civic soul to new owners who aren't satisfied unless they reap 15 percent to 25 percent profit every year. He wishes that the

newspapers would revert back to local ownership, which would be willing to accept a smaller margin. The on-line non-profit approach seems essential now to get sufficient revenue.

16. Non-political approach — Donohue clarified that voiceofsandiego.org does not endorse ballot questions or candidates. It must protect its status as a charitable, tax-exempt organization.

17. Other start-ups — Donohue said he is aware of the Joel Kramer effort in Minnesota and also another one in St. Louis scheduled to start in December. Another start-up in New Haven has a more ideological bent. An article in Governing magazine in 2006 highlighted new news-related websites, he said.

18. Summing up — Asked for closing comments, Donohue emphasized again the importance of focusing on a few areas and covering them well, rather than being superficial. The quality of reporting by voiceofsandiego.org has made the difference, he said. People will read longer stories that provide thorough, intelligent coverage.

19. Thanks — On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Donohue for meeting with us today.

***The Civic Caucus* is a non-partisan, tax-exempt educational organization. Core participants include persons of varying political persuasions, reflecting years of leadership in politics and business.**

A working group meets face-to-face to provide leadership. They are Verne C. Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Charles Clay, Bill Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty, Jim Olson, Wayne Popham and John Rollwagen.