



Summary of Meeting with Michael Skoler

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, October 11, 2007

Guest speaker: Michael Skoler, executive director of the Center for Innovation in Journalism at American Public Media

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

A. Introduction —Verne and Paul introduced Michael Skoler, executive director of the Center for Innovation in Journalism at American Public Media and former managing director of news for Minnesota Public Radio(MPR)/American Public Media. Earlier in his career, Skoler was a science correspondent and Africa correspondent for National Public Radio and later worked as a management consultant before joining MPR. Skoler and his team developed the Public Insight Journalism model at MPR. This is a system that gathers and synthesizes the knowledge and insights of thousands of people in the audience and brings that expertise into MPR's newsgathering process. MPR has recruited thousands of people as citizen sources and calls this group its Public Insight Network.

B. Comment and discussion —During Skoler's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

1. Explanation of the Public Insight Network —Skoler said that the network is a journalistic response to the emerging open source , knowledge-sharing culture created by the Internet . The network cultivates radio and web audiences as potential sources for news stories and helps reporters find individuals who have expertise and personal experience that can deepen the reporting of a story. MPR tracks the expertise of each person in a database, so its journalists can quickly reach out to those people who might have insight into a story.

The network also helps MPR understand the issues that really matter to the audience, rather than what the media thinks will interest people . —News organizations think that "new media" means they have to dress up a website with video or a front page with a color photo, but what really is important is the content, he said.

About 38,000 people are part of the network, of which some 21,000 are from Minnesota or the surrounding states , Skoler said. The MPR website states that a network participant can expect the following:

- Up to one e-mail a month asking for your insight on issues we plan to cover - you respond only if you have knowledge; otherwise ignore the request

- An occasional follow-up call or e-mail to get more information, if we follow a lead you provide
- Confidentiality: We won't quote you on the radio or the Web without your permission
- An open line for you to tell our radio programs what stories are important to you, your family and your community and help us set our coverage priorities
- An occasional invitation to public insight meetings we hold in your area
- No spam, marketing calls, or requests for money - your information is private and is not shared outside of a small circle of public radio journalists

2. Future of radio and future of the internet —Responding to a question, Skoler said that MPR primarily is radio now, but the future is the internet. Virtually all news that MPR reports on radio also is on MPR website. In addition, the website contains ~~copy~~ stories that are ~~is~~ not reported on radio. It is common for listeners to download MPR news and other programs from the website to their personal devices, such as I-Pods and phones, so they can listen at their convenience. We're in the waning years of thinking about MPR as 'radio', just as other organizations, such as newspapers, are in their waning years of print journalism. In the future we'll think first about the online presence of news gathering organizations, and second, about what form the content comes in (radio, podcast, Web article.) -

But radio is far from disappearing, he said. Skoler clarified that you'll probably always have some people reading the traditional newspaper and some people listening to radio. Moreover, for about a \$150 investment you now can get access radio streams over the Internet from any place in the world.

3. Clarification of Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media —Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) is a non-profit news and information service based in St. Paul. Skoler says the company uses the MPR brand for its regional radio and Web service, with stations for News, Classical Music, and The Current (adult alternative music). American Public Media is the national brand for MPR and is used for its national radio programs like A Prairie Home Companion, Marketplace and Weekend America.

According to its website, American Public Media is part of the American Public Media Group organization which comprises Minnesota Public Radio, Southern California Public Radio, and Greenspring Company. **William H. Kling (Bill Kling)** serves as President and CEO of American Public Media Group (APMG). American Public Media produces some 20 national programs —The annual budget of MPR and American Public Media combined is about \$70 million. The MPR portion is about \$60 million.

4. Financing sources —Financing for MPR and American Public Media is provided by listener contributions, foundations, underwriting by corporations, and sale of programs.

5. Statewide news coverage by MPR —Skoler claims that MPR now is the only statewide newsgathering organization in Minnesota. It has reporters stationed in Rochester, Duluth, St. Cloud,

Worthington, Moorhead, Sioux Falls, SD, and St. Paul. MPR has a total of 25 reporters. It is dedicated to providing the best local coverage possible. It has a regional news audience of about 500,000 persons. MPR plans to expand with other radio services as high definition radio comes into play.

In the last decade, most local radio and TV stations have scaled back their local newsrooms dramatically for financial reasons. Newspapers are now cutting their newsrooms due to financial pressures and trying to redeploy their staff to focus on local coverage , says Skoler.

6. New innovative programming —Skoler discussed a new audience-participation program known as "In the Loop". Its website has the following description: "At In The Loop , we take our cues from our audience. Through emails, the Web, and the spontaneity of our studio audience , the In The Loop community helps us shape each program." The program is broadcast on Sunday nights but the MPR digital audience will have access the Friday evening before the broadcast. In The Loop is produced by the Center for Innovation in Journalism, which Skoler runs. It is an experiment in Public Insight Journalism.

7. Importance of quality information in a democracy —A common base of knowledge is essential in a democracy, Skoler agreed. He cited a conversation he had in France with an individual with a communist background. It was impossible for them to converse, he said, because they never could agree on any set of facts. A committee member commented that many persons turn to news sources that confirm their biases. Thus the problem might be more with the general public than with the media itself. Skoler said he likes to think that there is a substantial part of the news-seeking public who don't just want their own views confirmed but are interested in news that is truly balanced.

8. The importance of establishing trust between a media outlet and its audience — A bond of trust exists between MPR and its audience, Skoler said. He contended that such a bond is much weaker between the daily newspapers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and its audience. The element of trust plus a relationship with the audience is what makes the MPR P ublic I nsight N etwork work, he said. Network participants believe in MPR and are committed to providing help. The network enables MPR to tap into an incredible amount of knowledge in its audience. (In a separate conversation at the close of the meeting, Skoler agreed that news media in the past were almost disdainful of suggestions from their audiences. It took a while even for MPR to fully appreciate the importance of the partnership with its audience.)

9. Size of web audience —The MPR radio and online audience s ha ve both been growing, Skoler said, contrary to a recent study by Harvard University that pointed to a drop in public radio audiences nationally. He said the MPR website attracts about 28,000 unique viewers a week, and about 363,000 unique viewers a month.

10. Servicing the P ublic I nsight N etwork — Two analysts in St. Paul work full time gathering, synthesizing and fact-checking the input from public insight participants. As an example of success of the network, Skoler cited the 35W bridge collapse. Even though MPR's staff is much smaller than that of the daily newspapers, its network of participants voluntarily submitted so much information that MPR's coverage was better , he said. -

11. Non-profit on-line news outlets are most likely to succeed —Skoler sees more potential for non-profit organizations gathering and reporting news online than for-profits. Skoler declined to

discuss the fact that MPR is in competition for contributions from other non-profit news organizations such as Minn Post, a new effort by Joel Kramer, and the Twin Cities Daily Planet.

12. Nature of potential audience —In response to a question, Skoler said MPR will not reach people who simply want their views confirmed. MPR wants to create civic discussion and reach the population who want to be informed by fact-based reporting. He believes the public wants news that is relevant to their lives. He blames the media for the decline in audience for TV news and newspapers. He says journalists have become disconnected from the public and don't provide coverage that is relevant and meaningful to people. His work creating Public Insight Journalism is about reversing that trend and creating genuine partnership with the audience.

13. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Skoler 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.