



Summary of Discussion with Roger Buoen, Andy Driscoll, and Bill Salisbury

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

July 31, 2009

Present: Verne Johnson, Chair; David Broden, Janis Clay, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jan Hively, Tim McDonald, Wayne Popham (by phone) Bob White

A. Context of the meeting - The Caucus is interested in exploring with key members of the media their strategy for approaching the coming year's Governor race. The need for leadership in Minnesota is acute, with many serious challenges facing the new office holder. With no other major positions up for election, the coming campaign will present a rare opportunity for the state to focus singularly on the Governorship, and on competing visions for the state's future. News media will have an important role to play.

B. Welcome and introductions - We have three speakers today, representing a range of news outlets: Roger Buoen (MinnPost), Andy Driscoll (CivicMedia), and Bill Salisbury (Pioneer Press).

Roger Buoen has been a journalist for 30 years. He spent most of those years as a reporter and editor at the Minneapolis Star and later the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He is currently co-managing editor of MinnPost.com. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in journalism as well as a law degree.

Andy Driscoll is a media writer, producer, and consultant with CivicMedia/Minnesota and The Driscoll Group. CivicMedia/MN is a statewide non-profit created to bring discussions of local and regional public affairs to residents and students, educating them about the workings of public governance and policymaking. He is producer and host of "Truth to Tell," a weekly hour-long public affairs talk show. Andy is former executive director of Sensible Land Use Coalition, and has a Masters in Liberal Studies from the University of Minnesota.

Bill Salisbury is a political reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. He has covered politics and government for more than 30 years. He joined the Rochester (Minn.) Post-Bulletin in 1972 and became that paper's state capitol correspondent in 1975. The St. Paul Pioneer Press hired him as a general assignment reporter in 1977 and assigned him to its state capitol bureau the following year. He served as the Pioneer Press' Washington correspondent from 1994 through 1999, when he returned the state capitol bureau.

C. Comments and discussion - During discussion the following points were raised:

1. The media's approach to the Governor's race— The chair opened the discussion by asking the three guests to describe what their organizations plan to do in preparation for, and during, the Governor's race.

a. MinnPost— Buoen started by noting that MinnPost plays a different role than the Star Tribune, and other traditional outlets. They see themselves as supplementary to the dailies. MinnPost has a smaller staff, but great writers. So they have more commentary, some in-depth investigative work, and unique insights and information.

"We'd like to do coverage that frames the debate, doesn't just react to what's happening," Buoen said. A couple of years ago they did a piece with the state economist Tom Stinson, examining the questions of state demographic changes and their affect on the budget. That reporting had a significant impact.

A member asked if MinnPost's staff directs the coverage, or if the writers do? "We have five editors," Buoen said, "who do some direction of stories with the writers. But the writers have significant discretion. The traffic on their site is "soaring" (800,000-1,000,000 page views/month); MinnPost is probably the largest nonprofit news website in the country not affiliated with a legacy news organization, he said.

They cover politics and government only, really, so it is a great resource for people concerned in these areas. When MinnPost covers the Governor's race they will provide both commentary and objective reporting coverage.

b. Pioneer Press— Salisbury said that at the Pioneer Press they're happy the Senate recount between Franken and Coleman is over so they can shift focus now to the coming election. His job at present is to figure out who the candidates are (there are by now about 12 on each side), and introduce them to the public. He aims to find out who they are, what they think, and press them hard on the issues: What would they do on the budget? On Health Care? The staff at the PP is small, too. Of those devoted to politics and elections, they have 4-5.

"We will pick issues, ask questions, and probe, probe, probe," he said. They have been prompted to evolve their media, too: Salisbury just signed up for Facebook, and one of his colleagues Twittered through Governor Pawlenty's speech in California earlier in the week.

c. Civic Media— Driscoll said that at CivicMedia-and *Truth to Tell*/specifically-they are able to go a bit more in depth within the format of a one-hour radio show. He tries to bring multiple perspectives together at the same time around an issue, with perhaps 4 or 5 guests on one program.

Driscoll said he covers stories that others don't-getting to the core of issues, such as racism in housing policy. "We'll take the same approach to the Governor's race," he said. "Try to explore the issues and bring data to the desk."

A member asked Driscoll if his group plans to bring any special coverage to the campaign. "We'll cover the Minneapolis and St. Paul mayoral elections in ways others won't," he said. "There may not be strong competition to the incumbents, but we will give coverage to the contenders."

2. Instant Runoff Voting— What about IRV? It's being referred to as 'ranked choice voting' now, Driscoll said, as an attempt to more accurately reflect its character. He supports it, and will watch it very closely as it is implemented in Minneapolis while covering the outcome of an identical initiative vote in St. Paul in November.

3. Differences in coverage among media outlets— A member asked Salisbury if he sees any fundamental distinction between the Pioneer Press and MinnPost? "MinnPost is doing a good job," he replied. "They tend to come from a more biased angle, which they say up front, while we are old-school reporting facts."

Buoen noted that the voice that writers convey on the web tends to be more conversational than in print media. "We try to draw a distinction between more objective political stories-'articles'-and commentary, or 'posts.'"

Driscoll concurred that MinnPost's front page is devoted essentially to "standard journalism," with editorial content throughout the site. Seems to be a good mix, was the consensus.

All of the guests lamented the slide in quality of news coverage, citing the analysis paid that morning to what types of beers would be consumed at the Beer Summit President Obama hosted Thursday at the White House.

Bob White, former editorial page editor at the Star Tribune, commented that some writers at MinnPost provide quick updates on the site-on a story, about a candidate. Sometimes they're opinionated, but the writers are up front about that. Will coverage of the Governor's race be in an editorial or classical format?

"We are still trying to figure out the web medium," Buoen said. They still want the site to be news-orientated. "It depends on the writer. Some feel very comfortable in an opinion voice, providing analysis. Others prefer the telling of a story. "We are flexible with reporters; we just ask that people be upfront and transparent."

"As long as people draw a distinction between telling what's going on and what they hope or think is going on, you'll be alright," White commented.

4. Assuring the quality of candidates and coverage— A member asked, *How can we guarantee a good candidate comes to the surface?*

"Something very significant changed last election," Salisbury said, "with Pawlenty's opting out of public financing. Both he and Hatch spent the bulk of their time raising money. They weren't accessible to the people. Peter Hutchinson did force them to answer some hard questions. We will do stories like that, picking an issue and drilling down."

"At this point with so many candidates we have a difficult time drilling-down," he said.

Because of all the job losses, a member asked, are the journalists covering this election less experienced?

Salisbury said that there hasn't been much turnover in the quality of the people who are involved. There are increasingly new media outlets represented at the capitol, and they seem to be doing a good job.

One member expressed concern that she doesn't see much serious, deep analysis of the state budget. Some people know how to read a billion dollar budget the news media doesn't.

"We don't do a good job with that, partly because audiences are confused by the arcane nature of budget talk," Driscoll conceded. "Someone who does finance well is Chris Farrell with MPR/American Public Media. "He covers essentially the economics beat."

Salisbury noted that the Pioneer Press did have reporters this past session who got deep into the Health and Human Services budget, to the K-12 budget, and into the Higher Ed budget. These comprise 80 percent of the state's spending.

"I think the role of the media in this campaign," a member said, "is to give voice to the stakeholders-get them involved." Who are the stakeholders? "We used to know," but it's less clear today.

Driscoll lamented the role of media in packaging candidates as so much consumable products-packaging public service positions as commodities, to be sold over television in 30-second pitches. Because so much of their revenue comes from campaign commercials, conflicted TV stations are hesitant to critically examine candidates, their claims and their promises.

Buoen wasn't sure he agreed that media doesn't provide enough background on candidates. "Google someone's name," he said, "and a lot comes up. The problem may be more that the public doesn't do enough work itself."

"Ideas need to start with the private public and flow up," a member emphasized. "We're missing that now. Media and government officials talk with think tanks and academics, but there are other stakeholders out there."

5. Closing— The chair asked the guests if they had any final thoughts to share.

Driscoll commented on the nominating process, saying that the recruiting power for parties has been diminished by removing them from financing campaigns and choosing accountable candidates. "If you select by caucus as we do in this state, then a smaller and smaller group of insiders do the selecting." This is part of his case for ranked-choice voting.

Salisbury said that when the field of candidates does get narrowed down, reporters will need to press them to fully answer questions, to the point. "If you have any suggestions for questions, let us know," he said.

Buoen commented that organizations like the Civic Caucus and news organizations need to frame the discussion during campaigns, or else the candidates do. The Caucus has been thinking about convening a group of former state leaders to think on just this question. That conversation will come, as the summer draws to a close.

And with that, thanks all around for a good session.