Chris Ison, University of Minnesota Journalism Professor

Public policy and news organizations must find better ways to convey public policy issues

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

Mainstream news organizations have given up much of their role in setting the news order of the day, says University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication Associate Professor Chris Ison. A former Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the *Star Tribune* , he notes that people getting their news online are empowered to read the way they want to. With news media websites listing the most-read stories of the day, the media are allowing the public on the website to set the day's news agenda. And he believes that agenda is not the way most editors would order the stories.

Ison asserts that it's hard to take complex stories and make them interesting to people. He says newspapers are reluctant to go deep and spend substantial resources and space to understand issues the public is reluctant to invest its time in, like how state funding is distributed to school districts. News media are tracking how many people click on their stories and how many people are watching or listening to their news on any given day. He notes, though, that news organizations do sometimes pick certain issues and go in-depth on them.

He believes that both public-policy and news organizations have to find better ways to tell stories about complex public-policy issues. One way to make a story about school funding more accessible, he says, would be to find people affected by changes in school funding and tell their stories. Another tactic is to explain things visually, using graphics that are digestible.

Ison states that reporters are looking for background data on policy issues and that public-policy organizations don't do enough to provide information reporters can use. He advises these organizations that if they want to tell stories that journalists will run, they must simplify things and find a way to break some news. It must be news the public cares about. And it's not good enough, he says, to raise problems without also raising solutions. Reporting that someone or some organization is doing really well at solving a problem makes an interesting story.

Biography

Chris Ison is associate professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. He was assistant managing editor for investigative projects at the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis from 2001 to 2004. He was a reporter on the *Star Tribune's* investigative team and also covered federal agencies, casinos and local government. He also covered state politics, local government, police and courts for the *Duluth News Tribune* from 1983 to 1986.

Ison and fellow reporter Lou Kilzer won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting in 1990 for a series of stories on arson and links between the St. Paul Fire Department and profits from arsons and suspicious fires. His stories have won various national and state awards, including awards from Investigative Reporters and Editors, the National Press Club, the Associated Press and other organizations. He supervised projects that won national awards from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers and the Society of Professional Journalists. He is co-author of the book *Media Ethics Today: Issues, Analysis, Solutions* .

Ison teaches courses in news reporting and writing, investigative reporting, and media ethics. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota's School of Journalism and Mass Communication in 1983.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Chris Ison, journalism professor and former reporter, to get his perspective on what kind of training future journalists need and the role different parts of the media play in Minnesota's process for developing sound policy proposals.

Discussion

"The media" is a useless term now, because media today are so varied and diverse. "We have really good media and really awful media," said University of Minnesota (U of M) Journalism and Mass Communication Associate Professor Chris Ison. We have citizen journalism, citizens who write blogs, some of which few people read, some that aren't very responsible and some that break news all the time. "The Drudge Report started as kind of a blog," he said. "Now if it links to a story in the *Star Tribune,* that's the best traffic the paper has all day."

"We have CBS, Fox, MSNBC, the *National Enquirer* , the *Star Tribune* , the *New York Times,* " Ison continued. "I tell my students, 'You can't just talk about media, you must be more specific.'"

The fact that people lump together the media is partially responsible for people not trusting the media today. Ison said a 2011 Pew Research survey showed that only 25 percent of people say news organizations get their facts right. He said Republicans are more apt to distrust news media than are Democrats.

He referred to a 2014 Gallup Poll that showed trust in newspapers, TV news and news on the Internet is at an all-time low. It's in the bottom third of the 17 institutions surveyed, just above Congress. Big business was about the same as the media.

"You can kind of understand why people don't trust the media," Ison said, "because you don't know what specific medium they're talking about. They could be talking about a lot of different media. And part of that lack of trust you can understand, because media organizations have been cutting their budgets and kind of tolling the death knell for awhile. Ad revenues are down by millions of dollars. The classified sections in newspapers used to be thick and now they're down to almost nothing."

An interviewer asked why things would be better if money were not an issue. Ison responded that trust would still be an issue, but maybe less of an issue if we were still in the days where the media could hire more people. He said TV news stations are hiring people with far less experience than in the past and people who haven't been in town very long. "It leads to a credibility issue," he said. "It's harder to get a lot out of the 10 p.m. television news."

A lot of young people today get their news "sideways," via Twitter or social media. Ison said young people are not logging directly into, for example, the S*tar Tribune* 's website. Instead, the paper gets a huge portion of its online traffic from people coming into stories through links from other sources.

Mainstream news organizations have given up much of their role in setting the order of the day. People choose news the way they want to choose news, Ison said. "It's a bit of an issue. The media have lost that gathering place they once had. The other side of the coin is that people are empowered to read the way they want to. On the *Star Tribune* website, one of the most prominent elements is a list of 'most read stories.' They're allowing the public on the website to set the day's news agenda. It's not the way most editors would order the stories. How people read has changed a lot."

The *Star Tribune* website now features more Variety stories and stories from *The Wrap* about celebrities and Hollywood, Ison said. They're getting a lot of clicks, which helps ad revenue. "Newspapers have been having a hard time making money on their websites," he said.

The high cost of getting a journalism education has become a real issue. "It took me eight years to get through college, because I was working at the campus newspaper [the *Minnesota Daily* at the U of M]," Ison said. "I spent so much time working at the campus newspaper that I truly became a journalist in college."

Today, he said, most students are trying to finish college in four years. "Learning journalism is about practice and *doing* journalism. It's tougher when they have to get out in four years, they have to have a part-time job on the side and they're trying to work at the campus newspaper or campus radio station. That's put a lot of pressure on journalism students. That's a big issue."

Journalism schools are trying to get students doing professional journalism while in school. Ison noted that the U of M is using a teaching hospital approach to some degree: getting students to *do* journalism that gets published while they're studying journalism, just like medical students work in hospitals while they're still in school. "We're a research university, but at the journalism school, we have worked hard to cultivate a relationship with the professional media here," he said. "It's one of our strengths."

The journalism school has a practicum with the *Pioneer Press* one semester and with the *Star Tribune* the next semester. Ison said there are 13 students working at the *Star Tribune* this semester, who will have probably 150 bylines in the paper over the semester. It was similar at the *Pioneer Press* in the fall.

The journalism school runs the Murphy News Service in partnership with community newspapers. Ison said the school has students write for those newspapers, again, so the students get published. In his in-depth reporting class, he partners with *MinnPost*, a nonprofit, online newspaper. "We try to get things the students write in the classroom published in *MinnPost*," he said. "When they're writing for the real public, the stakes are higher. It gets students doing more journalism."

One of the biggest challenges in journalism today is transparency in government. "It's a huge problem," Ison said. "It's a huge problem at the U of M, which is very public relations-minded. They're reluctant to give up public records and they're dismissive of reporters. This happens all over government, with many public agencies violating the open records law. It'd be interesting to know how many spokespeople, media representatives and public information officers have been hired in government and how much is being spent to basically block access. That's very different from how it was when I was getting into the business."

The U of M's campus newspaper, the *Minnesota Daily* , has always been independent of the journalism school. Ison said, though, the school tries to support the *Daily*, even though the paper's staff members get to run their own show. "I think they do great work," he said. Because staff members often have to leave to take part-time jobs, the paper doesn't have as stable a workforce as it used to. But he noted that quite a few students who have worked at the *Daily* have been hired by the *Star Tribune* in recent years.

The journalism school is not training a lot of students to be experts in various subject areas, because news organizations are looking for broad skills. An interviewer asked why those who are training young journalism students assume that it's merely a craft and that students don't need to know anything about public affairs. The interviewer commented that newspapers would never hire anybody for the sports pages who didn't know anything about sports. "But when it comes to public affairs reporting, you don't have to know anything," he said.

Ison replied that the journalism school is not training a lot of experts in single subject areas because they're not that employable. Newspapers hire fewer experts today because of budget cuts. He noted that some students do double majors in things like economics or political science, but most graduates are learning on the job about public affairs and other topics. "It takes years of reporting to really become an expert," he said.

The journalism school tries to train students to concentrate on local stories. An interviewer commented that much of the dialogue in different forms of media focuses on national and international issues, but he asked who's covering public affairs in Minnesota. Ison responded that he has never assigned a student to write a national story. Instead, he has students write local stories.

He noted that students are reading more national news than local news, because there is more access to national news on the Internet. More and more students decide they want to be foreign correspondents, but Ison tells them they'll probably have to cover the police department and then work their way up to covering City Hall first. "We try to train them to start with local news," he said. "With national news so accessible online, local news organizations have to cover local news well and we have to train students to do that."

You can usually find out who's in charge of making a decision, whether at a business or in government, and who's affected by the decision and how. Ison said it depends on the story, but he tries to teach his students how to do that. "There are polarized sides, but there's someone in charge," he said. He also believes it's important to get journalism students to use more academic research, because that provides more empirical evidence on many topics, rather than falling back on "he-said-she-said" stories.

It's hard to take complex stories and make them interesting to people. An interviewer noted that back in the 1970s and 1980s, Citizens League reports would be picked up by the newspapers and discussed very quickly. He suggested that the media could add depth to covering public-policy issues by having reporters following a set of issues for a long time or by doing investigative journalism, which can have a big impact. He asserted that there is no in-depth reporting on important issues like how state school aid is distributed to school districts or what is going on with public assistance. These are major spending areas in the state budget.

Ison responded that newspapers are reluctant to go deep and spend substantial resources and space to understand issues that the public is reluctant to invest its time in. "It's a hard problem," he said. "It's somewhat a matter of economics. In-depth reporting takes space and we don't give as much space to issues like that as we used to." Also, news organizations don't have the financial resources they used to have.

He noted that news organizations do pick their spots and go in-depth on many issues. Recently, local news organizations-the *Star Tribune* , in particular-have gone in-depth on issues like child welfare, day care and caring for disabled adults. The papers look for solutions in those stories.

"Newspapers are paying attention to how many people click on their stories, while electronic media are tracking how many people watch television news on any given night," Ison said. "Some do try to slice off a bit at a time on these complex issues."

Reporters are looking for background data on issues. An interviewer asked Ison for his impression of the performance of institutions of public policy outside of the media in developing background pieces on important issues and commenting on the pros and cons of various methods of resolving community problems.

Ison responded that this is outside of his area of expertise, but that the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the U of M is very relevant and gets in the news a lot. But we don't see much coverage of many of the other public-policy groups, such as Growth & Justice. "They're not getting in the mainstream media," he said. But he noted that *MinnPost* does cover some public issues in greater depth. "It has a smaller audience and is a nonprofit, so it can make that choice."

The interviewer suggested that education on a given issue from the public-policy organizations could provide background for reporters. Ison agreed and said reporters want data and that these organizations don't do enough in providing background data reporters can use.

We have to find better ways to tell stories about complex public-policy issues. Ison said one way to make a story about school funding, for example, more accessible would be to find people affected by changes in school funding and tell their stories. Another tactic, he said, is to explain things visually, using graphics that are digestible. "There is a science and expertise to that. Newspapers are hiring those people."

He asserted that if we want more young people reading these stories, an explanation of what a story is about must be promoted on Facebook and Twitter, along with a link to the full story.

Writers at *MinnPost* and *Politics in Minnesota* are often experts on their topics. An interviewer asked about the impact of *MinnPost*. Ison commented that *MinnPost* is growing and has done well, even though it doesn't pay a lot to its writers. "In some ways, it's citizen journalism," he said. "They're able to get people to write who have expertise in a topic. They know what they're talking about. It's a diverse set of writers, who use a conversational style. *MinnPost* takes on complex issues. Sometimes, the writers have a bias, but they're transparent about the bias."

Stories about important public-policy issues might get on the front page if they break some news. "Find a way to break some news," Ison said. "When the Humphrey School gets on the front page, it's because of a new poll or something going on we didn't know about. It has to be news the public cares about. Our first responsibility is to the citizens."

One emerging model of covering news is that some nonprofits try to get grants from foundations to do certain work. Ison noted that Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) works to try to get content initiatives for emerging issues that don't get enough coverage. MPR tries to find funding institutions that care about these issues and tries to get financial help to cover them. "It can work, but I worry about conflicts of interest," he said. That's why funders shouldn't get to determine what stories get covered or how. Organizations such as MPR and *MinnPost* are careful about that.

As we get more used to the digital onslaught of news, consumers will get better at sorting through junk to find the news. "It's 'buyer or viewer or reader beware'," Ison said. "There's a big burden on news consumers to choose well. There's great journalism out there every day. But people have to dig for it to find it, which can be difficult amid all the clutter."

"Young people are getting important news today, but in different ways, like through links on Facebook and Twitter," he continued. "When young people buy houses, they will care about taxes. When they have kids, they'll care about schools. There's hope."

If you want to tell stories that journalists will run, you must simplify things. " It must be breaking news," Ison advised. "It's got to pop a little bit. You must define a problem well that is new. What news organizations want to do is expose problems that haven't been exposed before. They'll also try to cover what caused the problems and what the solutions are. That's called 'solutions journalism.'"

He said it's not good enough to raise problems without raising solutions. It's an interesting story if you can show how someone or some organization is doing really well at solving a problem. "It'd be great to start a beat on 'Things That Work.'"

We should place more emphasis on helping the press. At the conclusion of the meeting, an interviewer commented that perhaps there should be less emphasis on whether the press is doing what it should be doing in reporting on public-policy issues. "Instead, there should be more emphasis on helping the press," the interviewer said. "Public-policy organizations should do their utmost to try to help people understand an issue. The concentration of our work in public policy should be thinking about the reporter. Too often we write things in an esoteric manner."