



Veteran Reporter Bill Salisbury

Robust newspaper reporting on public-policy proposals no longer as common as in the past

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

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Heather Bandeen, Dave Broden (vice chair), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Frank Wright.

Summary

According to veteran *St. Paul Pioneer Press* political and Capitol reporter Bill Salisbury, there are several reasons why reporting on quality public-policy proposals is not as robust as it was when he started his career as a Capitol reporter in 1975:

- (1) Reporters at the *Pioneer Press* now write first for online and only secondly for the print edition of the newspaper. The focus on digital means getting stories posted as quickly as possible, he says, which might mean less time to do enterprise reporting, such as in-depth series.
- (2) He notes that his newspaper, along with most others, has a shrinking news hole, the space available for news content, which makes it difficult to report the background and context of a story.
- (3) In addition to the shrinking available news space, most newspapers have a shrinking newsroom staff. The *Pioneer Press* newsroom has a staff of fewer than 100 people now, down from 250 a decade ago.
- (4) There are so many more competing sources of information that want the newspaper's attention. Although the newspaper sorts out very skeptically the sound bites and avalanche of statements sent by public relations firms on behalf of groups vying for attention at the Capitol, Salisbury says the growing numbers of lobbying organizations at the Capitol overshadow the work of "do-gooder" organizations.

(5) The role of institutional memory in reporting is important, but many young reporters today have little background in Minnesota's general, political and policy history.

(6) There are a lot more public-policy proposals out there, but Salisbury is not sure the quality is as good as it was.

In contrast, when he started at the *Pioneer Press* in 1977, whenever the Citizens League issued a report, it was important and the paper had to cover it. Now the Citizens League and other similar groups must compete for the attention of reporters and space in newspapers with advocacy, lobbying and special interest groups. Salisbury believes that has diluted the influence of public-policy groups.

He says the future of newspapers does not look good, but there is a future for journalism through the efforts of bright young people trying to figure out the best way to communicate about public affairs in this digital age.

Biography

Bill Salisbury is a veteran, semi-retired political reporter for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. He has covered politics and government for more than 40 years. He started reporting for his father's weekly newspaper, the *Belgrade (Minn.) Tribune*, while he was in high school. While attending the University of Minnesota, he wrote for the *Minnesota Daily* newspaper and the *Ivy Tower* literary magazine.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota, Morris, with a bachelor's degree in history, he started his daily newspaper career in 1971 at the *Fairmont (Minn.) Sentinel*. 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*'s Washington correspondent from 1994 to 1999, when he returned to the state Capitol bureau.

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 Bill Salisbury, a veteran reporter of politics and government, to get his perspective on how Minnesota's process for developing sound policy proposals worked in the past, his assessment of how well that process is working today and his thoughts on the role the media have played in the past and play currently in that process.

Discussion

Reporters for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* now write first for online and secondly for the print edition of the newspaper. Bill Salisbury of the *Pioneer Press* noted that the newspaper is owned by Digital First. He said stories he writes are first posted online as quickly as possible at the newspaper's website, twincities.com. Then the stories go secondly into the print edition of the newspaper, perhaps just as they appear online or perhaps with revisions. So his first responsibility is to the online edition of the paper.

"The newspaper business is focusing on digital stories, which means getting things quickly," Salisbury said. "That may mean less time to do enterprise reporting, but there is still an emphasis on it."

There have been a lot of changes at the State Capitol since 1975. Salisbury said he started covering the State Capitol in 1975 when he worked for the *Rochester Post-Bulletin*. One of the biggest changes, he said, is that at that time, there were no women in the Senate and about seven women in the House. Now one-third of legislators are women.

There are a great number of new perspectives that are brought to the Legislature today, he said. The makeup of the Legislature is a better representation of the state. But, he pointed out, only seven percent of legislators are people of color, while people of color comprise 20 percent of the state population.

Covering the Capitol follows a cycle. Salisbury explained that the Legislature will come into session in a month, but campaigns are already underway. "Our focus will be on politics, not policy," he said, "although they're interrelated, because policy issues drive a lot of the politics. We'll follow the Legislature and when the session ends in May, we'll jump into campaign mode, when there's not much time to focus on other policy issues."

"After November," he continued, "we'll prepare for the budget session in 2017. When that ends in May 2017, it's the one opportunity we have in a two-year cycle to get into mischief. It's the one time we can pick the subjects we want to cover. Our work is not dictated by what the governor or the legislators are doing, but by the issues we think we should be looking at." He said that's when reporters look to groups like the Civic Caucus for ideas.

The *Pioneer Press* is still capable of doing in-depth stories, working from a variety of sources. Salisbury used the example of a 2015 three-part series on water quality in Minnesota called "Troubled Waters." It was written by four reporters with an interest in the topic. The paper no longer has an environmental reporter because of its shrinking newsroom, he said.

In August of 2015, Salisbury did a project called "Aging in Place," where he spent a month looking at issues of older people wanting to stay in their own homes and the variety of services they'll need. He pulled together information from the Minnesota Board on Aging, the Wilder Foundation, other private foundations, local government agencies, transportation organizations and housing groups.

"It was fascinating," he said. "That's the best part of reporting. Those are examples of what reporters can do when they have time. A lot of our regular work is stenographic, reporting on what the governor and legislators are saying. They're dictating the agenda."

Campaigns can be a chance to educate people and to dig into policy issues. However, Salisbury said that does not seem to be the case in the current presidential campaign. If the local campaigns bring up issues, he said, the paper will be fact-checking what the candidates say.

One of the big differences today is that there are so many more competing sources of information that want the newspaper's attention. There's also much more data readily available online now, Salisbury said. Organizations like the Civic Caucus can say, "Here are the data and here's what we think you should be doing with it."

Online reporting organizations like *MinnPost* are players, but they're small. "I'm not sure how many people read them," Salisbury said. "They have a small, but very talented staff." He called Briana Bierschbach, *MinnPost*'s Capitol reporter, a "terrific reporter" and said he reads *MinnPost* every day. "I think they're a welcome addition."

The newspaper sorts out very skeptically the sound bites and avalanche of statements sent by public relations firms. "There are some very professional public relations operatives who realize we're not just going to take a news release from someone and put it in the paper," Salisbury said. "We try to avoid quoting public relations flacks as much as we can. We want them to put us in touch with the experts who provided them the information. We want to know who they're working for and what they're trying to sell. There are some very reputable public relations firms in the Twin Cities who treat us professionally."

The *Pioneer Press* and most other newspapers have a shrinking space available for news content.

An interviewer commented that often the listener or reader doesn't have the context to understand when data or information is reported. He asked how people learn from the media if they don't have the knowledge to understand and interpret what they're reading. Salisbury responded that the *Pioneer Press* and most other newspapers have a shrinking "news hole", the space available for actual news reportage. He said the *Star Tribune* might be an exception, although its local news hole is shrinking. That smaller news hole makes it difficult for newspapers to report the background and context of a story.

"Another reason that it's a problem is our emphasis on digital," he noted, "which means getting things out fast." He said he's on Twitter all day long to find out what's going on. "But that's 140 characters and has no context whatsoever." An interviewer asked why he follows Twitter so closely. In response, Salisbury said he uses it to find out what's breaking news, so he can pursue it. "Pursuing it is the problem, as is having time to get into depth on one of these issues," he said. But he said at the *Pioneer Press*, reporters are encouraged to do occasional in-depth series.

He noted that his paper has a partnership with the *Forum News Service*, which includes the *The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead* (formerly known as the *Fargo Forum*) and its 39 papers in the region. Most of them are small weeklies, but they also own most of the daily newspapers outside of the metro area, including Duluth, Bemidji, Grand Forks, Red Wing, Worthington, Willmar and others. "The News Service provides state news to us," Salisbury said. "That's an asset we didn't have before." He said his paper still uses the Associated Press, but that's another shrinking-news-hole organization that is not doing as much as they used to in covering the state.

The large numbers of lobbying organizations at the Capitol overshadow the work of "do-gooder" organizations. An interviewer asked whether the "do-gooder" organizations, such as the Civic Caucus, the Humphrey School, the foundations and others are producing the high-quality, specific proposals we expect from them. Salisbury responded that he isn't in a position to evaluate that.

But, he noted, there are groups, like the Citizens League, that visit the Capitol regularly and keep the press updated on the work they're doing. "But I, as a reporter, don't see as much of them," he said. "Maybe it's because we're inundated by information. The fastest-growing industry in Minnesota is lobbying. Forty years ago, there were only a handful of groups that lobbied the Legislature." Now there are multiple groups representing cities, school districts and other entities. He said there are now dozens, maybe hundreds, of lobbyists per legislator. "They overshadow the kind of work you're talking about," Salisbury said. "Groups like the Civic Caucus are competing with these lobbying groups for reporters' time and the interest of governors and legislators."

Rather than trying to put all the background and details into a story in the paper's print edition, reporters can put more detail in the online version. An interviewer commented on the dilemma facing reporters of how to write a story people will read that includes enough detail to set the context and to be comprehensive and correct. Salisbury responded that, with the digital news as first priority, reporters can write a shorter story for the print edition and put more details in the online version. They could also post a link to another source of information.

The *Pioneer Press* newsroom has a staff of fewer than 100 people now, down from 250 ten years ago. An interviewer asked how the media can get the public aware and involved in a public debate while an issue is evolving. Salisbury responded that groups like the Civic Caucus should keep the news media posted. "Let us know what you're doing," he said. But with a cut in the newsroom staff from 250 ten years ago to fewer than 100 today, his newspaper is short-staffed. In addition, the paper no longer has a Washington bureau and doesn't employ as many specialists.

"You have to come and talk to us," he said. "Come in with the information and tell us how we should pursue it, face-to-face rather than by e-mail. An e-mail is easy to delete without reading it."

Media are so diversified now that we don't all have the same conversations. An interviewer commented that today different people have their own favorite media to look at to get the news. Not everyone reads the newspaper now and there aren't the same types of common conversations about issues that there used to be. Salisbury agreed that there aren't the same conversations as before. Now there are many cable news channels offering different opinions about the news. "We don't have these common, shared interests that we used to," he said.

Part of the answer is through electronic media, Salisbury said. In the *Pioneer Press* office, there is a big screen allowing staff members to find out what people are reading online. Much of the readership comes through links to the paper's website from places like CNN and the *Drudge Report*.

Institutional memory among newspaper reporters is very important. In response to an interviewer's question about the role of institutional memory in reporting, Salisbury said it's very important. "It's one of the few assets I have," he said.

"In politics, if you don't have that context about how our policies evolved, it's a problem," he continued. Bright, young reporters from elsewhere have no idea what the DFL is, for example. And one young intern didn't know who Walter Mondale is. Frequently, he sits down with some of the young reporters

to give them a bit of Minnesota history. There are lots of young reporters who don't know the history of the "Minnesota Miracle" or of the Fiscal Disparities legislation. "Some are interested and some aren't," he said.

Education and taxes are always big stories that get read. Salisbury said young people often start reading the newspaper when their children begin to reach school age. "Schools are a big issue," he said. "We always do stories on education."

Stories on taxes are the most political and they're among the most well read, he said. "People are very interested in education and taxes. But I don't know how we get them detailed information about the school-aid formula." He added that important education stories lately have been about achievement issues and violence in the St. Paul schools.

Politics are now so much more polarized and politics much more extreme. Salisbury said there are more news sources out there, like Fox News, that reinforce certain political beliefs. People are more likely to get that kind of information, rather than analyze other people's points of view. An interviewer commented that the world is more complicated, but people understand less.

The journalism business is fiercely competitive and the people who land reporter jobs are the most qualified. "I'm very impressed about the kind of talent that's out there among young reporters," Salisbury said. "I'm a little dismayed by the lack of focus on public-policy issues." There's a greater emphasis on entertainment both on television and in the newspaper. "We must entertain, as well as inform."

There is no formal training to background new reporters on Minnesota's general, policy, and political history. Salisbury said he presumes every news organization has some way of introducing new staff members to the community. He said the newspaper used to have several veteran reporters come in to speak to the newsroom staff occasionally about St. Paul history and important past and current issues. The paper would rent a bus to tour the city so that new staff members could learn about St. Paul.

He said the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Minnesota used to have Capitol reporters come in and talk to the school's public reporting classes, but that doesn't happen much anymore. Instead, the paper hosts a number of student interns, but their background in public affairs and history is generally weak. "I wish they had more background in political science, history and public affairs in general," Salisbury said.

Some news media try to report on public issues before final decisions are made. Salisbury said he thinks the *Pioneer Press*, *Star Tribune* and *Minnpost* try to do that. "We're constantly talking to sources about what's coming up, what's the next big thing, what's going on under the radar," he said. "We're looking to get things out there." He said television news isn't always there following and reporting on public-policy issues and will often wait till the final decision has been made to do a story.

The *Pioneer Press* has stopped being a statewide newspaper and is now an east metro paper. An interviewer asked about the metro newspapers' coverage outside of the metro area. Salisbury said the *Pioneer Press* is no longer a statewide paper, but an east metro publication. He said the paper's circulation is stable, at 250,000 every Sunday. He noted, though, that the *Star Tribune* has kept up

four regional reporters around the state. He believes the outstate dailies have gone downhill because of out-of-state corporate ownership that doesn't have the same concern for each community.

One important link to the non-metro area, Salisbury said, is the Forum News Service, which picks up stories from his paper, while the paper picks up stories from the news service. So *Pioneer Press* stories sometimes run in the Greater Minnesota papers that belong to the news service.

Groups with proposals for innovative public policy changes now compete with advocacy groups, lobbying groups and special interest groups for attention. An interviewer asked whether there has been a change so that Minnesota is not doing as much quality innovation in public policy in 2016 as it was in 1975. Salisbury said, "When I started at the *Pioneer Press*, whenever the Citizens League issued a report, it was important and we had to cover it."

Now the Citizens League and other similar groups must compete for the attention of reporters and space in newspapers with advocacy, lobbying and special interest groups. "I think it's diluted the influence of public-policy groups," he said.

Salisbury said he agreed with an interviewer's idea that perhaps it's time to look at the quality of ideas coming out of foundations, do-gooder organizations and academic institutions to see if they're taking seriously the trust that's been put in them by donors and taxpayers. "There are a lot more ideas out there, but I'm not sure the quality is as good," Salisbury said.

Another interviewer had recently attended an event where Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk said no one is coming to the Legislature today with good, actionable proposals on any issue.

A different interviewer asked whether the nonpartisan legislative research arms of the House and the Senate are bringing proposals to legislators. He asserted that used to happen more with proposals from House Research, but today they're not asked to do that. Salisbury responded that the nonpartisan research staff, especially in House Research, has a lot of institutional memory, but they're usually reacting to requests for information from their bosses, rather than making proposals.

The future of newspapers does not look good, but there is a future for journalism. In response to an interviewer's question about the future of media, Salisbury said he is very pessimistic about the future of newspapers. "Our readers are getting older," he said. "When the baby boomers die, newspapers will probably go with them." But he said newspapers are still very strong now.

In contrast, he said, he's optimistic about the future of journalism. "We've got a lot of bright young people trying to figure out the best way to communicate in this digital age," he said. "They're still interested in doing the work of covering public affairs and making sure the information is available to people, even if we have to twist their arms to get them to pay attention to it."

He suggested that the Civic Caucus make a better effort to get its information out to reporters. "You're going to be competing with a lot more organizations and groups that want our attention," he said. "You're going to have to work harder to get out your information through us."