



# Andy Wallmeyer, Publisher and CEO of MinnPost

## Improve Minnesota by bettering the quality of our public discourse

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


*March 10, 2017*

### Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden, Lonnie Broden, Janis Clay (executive director), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz, Marina Lyon, Paul Ostrow (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Andrew Wallmeyer.

### Summary

Engaging more people in respectful and informed discussions of where we ought to head as a community is one of the best ways to improve our public decision-making, according to *MinnPost* Publisher and CEO Andy Wallmeyer. He agrees with the Civic Caucus that improved public decision-making is one of the surest paths to a better Minnesota. *MinnPost* exists to improve Minnesota by improving the quality of our public discourse, he says.

He reviews the November 2016 Civic Caucus report,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. He likes the report's philosophy and the Civic Caucus's emphasis on inclusion and transparency, both in the report and in the way it operates. But he believes the structures and mechanisms outlined in the report would not achieve the kind of public discussion the Civic Caucus is seeking. Instead, they would limit the number of people who choose to participate in the public-policy process. He says the format of the conversation the Civic Caucus suggests in its report demands a lot of its participants. He suggests a more open approach.

Wallmeyer discusses the problem of "filter bubbles" created by platforms like Facebook that show people only things they'll like and with which they'll agree. He says we also create our own place-based filter bubbles by where we choose to live, with our neighbors more likely to be like us today than they were even 10 years ago. These filter bubbles can cause people to assume that theirs is the only legitimate point of view.

*MinnPost* sees itself as a statewide media outlet, Wallmeyer says, and it hopes to expand its outstate coverage.

## Biography

Andrew Wallmeyer is publisher and CEO of *MinnPost*, an online-only news publisher best known for its coverage of Minnesota politics and policy. Wallmeyer joined *MinnPost* as publisher in 2014 and added the CEO title in 2016, when founders Laurie and Joel Kramer retired. As publisher and CEO, Wallmeyer leads a staff of 22, spending most of his time on business development, audience growth and strategic partnerships.

Prior to joining *MinnPost*, Wallmeyer spent three years as a strategic management consultant at McKinsey & Company, where he served a diverse array of clients. He concluded his time at the firm as a public-sector fellow, working on projects focused on state education policy, the use of technology in K-12 instruction and citizen satisfaction with state government.

Before his time at McKinsey, Wallmeyer reported for a number of news organizations in the U.S. and Germany, including *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the Associated Press, Dow Jones Newswires, the *Wisconsin State Journal* and the *Stillwater (Minn.) Gazette*.


Wallmeyer holds a B.A. in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an M.B.A. from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

### About *MinnPost* :

*MinnPost* is an online-only news publisher best known for its coverage of Minnesota politics and policy. *MinnPost* was founded in 2007 by Laurie and Joel Kramer out of concern over legacy media companies' declining investment in high-quality public affairs journalism. Since that time, *MinnPost* has grown to become one of Minnesota's most respected news outlets, as well as a national leader in the nascent nonprofit news industry. In two of the last three years, it was named among the nation's three best outlets of its size by the Online News Association.

On average, according to Publisher and CEO Andy Wallmeyer, *MinnPost* attracts 465,000 unique visitors every month. (A person would be counted twice if she or he logged in on two different devices during the month.)

## Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed *MinnPost* Publisher and CEO Andy Wallmeyer to get his reaction to the report and to learn about *MinnPost's* mission and its contribution to improving the public-policy process in Minnesota.

## Discussion

### **The philosophy in the Civic Caucus report on improving the public-policy process in Minnesota is good.**

Andy Wallmeyer of *MinnPost* started his remarks with that thought and said, "I'm a big fan of what the Civic Caucus is doing and what you're trying to do. I really like the philosophy in the report. I—and I believe everyone else here at *MinnPost*—agree that improved public decision-making is one of the surest paths to a better Minnesota."

"And engaging more people in respectful and informed discussions of where we ought to head as a community is one of the best ways to improve our public decision-making. We're very much on the same page with the Civic Caucus. It's why *MinnPost* exists and it's what we're trying to do every day, albeit in a different way. I like the Caucus's emphasis on inclusion and transparency, both in the text of your report and in the way you operate."

### **The vision outlined in the report would not achieve the kind of public discussion the Civic Caucus is seeking .**

Wallmeyer said that is his harshest critique of the report. "The structures and mechanisms you're suggesting would limit the number of people who choose to participate in the process," he said.

"It has a strongly institutional focus," he said of the process the report recommends. "The process seems to be driven by a relatively small number of organizations—cultural, academic, civic institutions. In that sense, it feels a little bit out of step with where, especially, younger people in the population see the nature of civic discourse and what they expect."

"By focusing on a small number of organizations that speak with an institutional voice," Wallmeyer continued, "there's a lot of emphasis on authority and distillation and synthesis, which is good. But people are inherently suspicious and are growing more suspicious of our leading cultural institutions every day. I don't think the answer is to move away from the institutions, but it does change how we have to operate."

He said people in the news business can no longer say, "I write for *the* paper. I gave you my conclusion. This is my source. Take my word for it." He believes there's a lot of work institutions can do in terms of focusing and advancing the conversation, but the general public expects institutions, including the media, to show their work in how they reached their conclusions. "What did you do? Who did you talk to?" That's especially true of millennials, he said.

In the media landscape, Wallmeyer said, there are organizations that have risen to become some of the largest public affairs or media organizations out there in a span of 10 years. He pointed out that Google and Facebook are each less than 20 years old.

**There's very much a generational mindset out there.** Wallmeyer made that comment and said, "There's a risk when we overly emphasize institutional authority, because it can delegitimize the process or product in the eyes of some people. They're inherently suspicious of institutions. They're inherently suspicious of Congress. They're inherently suspicious of the media. There's a millennial mindset that's a never-ending quest for authenticity."

An interviewer commented that millennials don't watch mainstream media, but they're just as well informed on topics and issues as we are. They're getting their information from multiple sources and they assimilate information differently.

**There are differences between data and information, and between knowledge and wisdom.** An interviewer made that remark and said many young people get caught up in data and information, but they have very little knowledge about how things connect.

"Where do we go when people traffic in this data-rich world," the interviewer continued, "but there's no shared knowledge base? How can we connect with that next generation of civic leadership, those aged 18 to 25?" He said just grabbing snatches of information is not the same as a yearlong Citizens League study committee. You can't do that in a short conversation.

Wallmeyer responded that data, information and knowledge are all essential to have an informed debate and conversation. "How important is the order in which those things come?" he asked. Some people could ask what the role of debate is. The Civic Caucus seems to be saying you have to have knowledge in order to participate in a debate. But some people say debate is the process through which you acquire knowledge. You could flip the order of those things and say anyone is welcome to the debate. If you do this online, you don't have to be instantaneous.

"There's been a fundamental shift in the way a public conversation unfolds," he continued, "which mirrors a shift in the way we're approaching information more broadly. It's like the process of editing. When do you edit? The institutional approach is that you edit on the front end. You credential." He said the Civic Caucus edits these conversations, for example, by deciding which speakers to invite.

It's the same thing with the internet and with newspapers, Wallmeyer said. "Now everybody publishes everything. Sometimes the result is fantastic." He pointed to Wikipedia, which he said is better in breadth and quality than the best print encyclopedias ever were, and to Amazon reviews, which he called "better than *Consumer Reports*."

"Forget about a filter in deciding who gets to participate in this conversation," Wallmeyer advised. "The more important questions are: How can we maximize the number of people who participate in the conversations? How can we maximize the number of contributions that are made? And how can we ensure that the most valuable contributions have the greatest impact? The role for institutions, in my view, is to structure and guide the conversation and to make sure we're posing the right questions and putting mechanisms in place to form a process that helps ensure the best things rise to the top."

He said another role institutions can and should continue to play is to help focus attention in an increasingly fragmented world. If there were a shared civic engagement platform where participants could pose questions and invite everyone to submit answers, for example, leading institutions could play a valuable role in helping point people there.

***MinnPost* exists to improve Minnesota by improving the quality of our public discourse.**

Wallmeyer made that statement and said, "We are about informed and respectful dialogue." But the news media, he said, has historically been terrible at measuring the impact of its work in those terms.

The average metro daily newspaper traditionally received 80 to 85 percent of its revenue from advertising, he said. "What the advertisers cared about were eyeballs; how big is your audience? So we got really good at measuring our audiences. But as to the impact our work has had in the communities we serve? We haven't been nearly so good at measuring that."

Wallmeyer said one measure he'd like to use in determining *MinnPosts* impact in the community is the extent to which people who read it feel they have the information they need to have an informed position on major issues of the day and that they understand the processes around those issues, so they know how to engage in them. If *MinnPost* does those two things, he believes, then ultimately, people will feel a greater sense of agency—they will be more likely to feel that they can positively impact the direction of their community.

**The format of the conversation the Civic Caucus is suggesting demands a lot of its participants.** Wallmeyer made that comment and said the table stakes for the conversation are very high. He noted that it's very difficult to skim a 27-page report, referring to the Civic Caucus report on Minnesota's public-policy process, noting that many people would likely put it into the category of "TL; DR" (Too long; didn't read).

He wondered if there's a way to have this public-policy conversation, but to figure out what the "atomic" units of it are and give people an option to engage at that more atomic level. We should think about how we'll know when we have a great public-policy discussion. "What would a more open approach look like?" he asked.

Wallmeyer gave two examples of what he sees as open approaches: Wikipedia and Twitter. There's a lot of public discourse on Twitter that tags public officials, asking them, for example, "Why aren't you fixing our potholes?" He said that's a different kind of engagement and accountability than the traditional call to an intern working the phones in a Congressional office, since the Tweet is a very discrete and very public action—something that's easy for others to view, digest and, if they care to, interact with and/or build upon."

"Consider ways to unpack your conversation and your conclusions into smaller pieces that are easier to digest," Wallmeyer advised the Civic Caucus group. "Encourage people to engage on those elements. Consider ways to give folks as many potential paths as possible to accessing and contributing to the conversation."

He encouraged Civic Caucus members to imagine building something that would allow people to engage on a single question via Facebook or Twitter. "If that were to exist, you could tell people that this is a place to express your comments right now, just like leaving comments at the end of an article on *MinnPost* or the *Star Tribune*," he explained.

**Is there a hierarchy of influence?** An interviewer explained an experiment that was done at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s. The experimenters created a survey that asked random people, "Is there a person whose opinion on a particular issue you respect?" They then asked the same question of the people who had been named as respected in the first survey. This process continued in that same way, until the experimenters created a "hierarchy of influence," the interviewer said.

The interviewer then asked how you can intervene in a way that doesn't just spread data and knowledge, but that influences things.

Wallmeyer responded that we could look to Twitter and Facebook as the ultimate longitudinal extensions of the experiment the interviewer described. "They're doing that in real time," he said. The systems look at how many followers someone has, what percentage of his or her posts are retweeted, what percentage of people are reacting or interacting with a piece of information, which people changed the direction or momentum of a particular conversation and which people are producing the tweets or posts that generate the most conversation.

**Filter bubbles strengthen people's ideological silos.** The newer media are providing people with more immediate information on obituaries or other pieces of news, an interviewer commented. "But when we deal with what we do as a public about an issue, lots of that information is clouded by people who are in silos," the interviewer said. "They're ideologically driven already to consume certain facts and news that strengthen their narrow silo view."

Wallmeyer agreed. He pointed to the "manifesto" Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg published Feb. 16, 2017, "[Building Global Community](#) ." Wallmeyer believes

the piece is "enormously significant." "It was a very public assertion—just short of *mea culpa*—that Zuckerberg recognizes that the way Facebook has set up their algorithms has created 'filter bubbles' and that the company has a social responsibility to do something about that," Wallmeyer said. "Facebook shows you stuff it knows you agree with, which ends up with some unintended negative consequences."

Wallmeyer explained that a filter bubble means someone is not even being exposed to people with alternate points of view. In Facebook, there's an algorithm that optimizes showing you things you'll like. "If everything you're exposed to shows you your point of view, you think people who don't hold that point of view are stupid," he said.

Online filter bubbles only exacerbate a long-term trend we're seeing in the physical world that has resulted in U.S. citizens living in more homogeneous communities than ever before, he said. Our neighbors are inclined to be more like us than they were 10 years ago. "It creates a place-based filter bubble," he said. "We're choosing that ourselves." But, he said, the Facebook filter bubble is scarier because it's so fast and so effective.

Wallmeyer said he believes Zuckerberg, in his statement, was saying that maximizing shareholder value is not enough, is not sufficient. "Zuckerberg came out and said we have a responsibility to look at more than that. They're trying to figure out exactly what that means in practice, I think, and they don't yet have the answer."

**What does democracy look like?** An interviewer commented that it's maddening to many in the Civic Caucus that so much political conversation is completely unrelated to public policy. "How do we change the conversation?" he asked. "Right now it's 'Resist.' People are marching and saying, 'This is what democracy looks like.'"

"Do you know what democracy looks like?" the interviewer asked. "Democracy looks like a bunch of people from all over Minnesota who have completely different political views sitting in a room yelling and screaming at each other, but somehow agreeing that they can figure something out. That's what democracy looks like."

The interviewer asked how we can change the conversation from "resist." "How can we change that culture?" he asked. "Part of being a good citizen is talking to people you disagree with. What's the role of the Civic Caucus and *MinnPost* in changing that culture?"

***MinnPost* does series on important topics.** Wallmeyer said his job is "to find the resources to do stuff like that. In our second decade, we're going to double down on the stuff we're good at, primarily providing thoughtful coverage of state politics and policy. We want to go deeper and have more full-time reporting positions dedicated to doing it better and deeper."

He said *MinnPost* is now considering a two-to-three-year project looking at race and disparities in Minnesota. "It would be full-time reporting—a beat for multiple years," he said. "It would be a steady drumbeat of coverage on a topic and would amount to a substantial body of work on a critical issue for our state."

***MinnPost* thinks about partnerships, especially with other media.** "We know we're not the be-all and end-all; no single media organization is," Wallmeyer said. "Our role in a multi-media-outlet partnership is to provide that steady drumbeat of high-quality coverage." He noted that *MinnPost* hosts more than a dozen events each year, most of which are designed to complement its online reports by discussing issues in person.

An interviewer asked how the in-depth effort would compare with the *Star Tribune's* investigative journalism pieces. "The *Star Tribune* is fantastic," Wallmeyer responded. "We're lucky to have one of the strongest metro daily newspapers in the nation here. People who've always lived in Minnesota don't appreciate the unusual quality of our news-media ecosystem. MPR (Minnesota Public Radio) is a public radio powerhouse. TPT (Twin Cities Public Television) sets the standard for public television broadcasters. And *MinnPost* is looked to as a national leader among the newest generation of nonprofit news outlets."

"The great challenge of our industry," Wallmeyer continued, "is that high-quality news pieces are expensive to produce, but have a limited shelf life. The combination of those two things means it's hard to make a profit in the news business. That becomes even more difficult for places that have a geographic focus that limits the size of their audience." He said that economic challenge is why *MinnPost* was founded as a nonprofit, noting that "hard" news has always been subsidized in some form. "Back in the day, the 'A' section of a newspaper was in effect subsidized by other, more profitable parts of the daily newspaper bundle—by the classifieds, the ads and syndicated content. But that product was in effect 'unbundled' by the internet."

He said investigative journalism units are the most expensive of all the high-quality editorial work. "It's great when a for-profit news outlet still has an investigative unit," he said. "We'd like to do more investigative journalism at *MinnPost*. And we don't see that as an either/or proposition with the *Star Tribune*. For the good of our state, we'd like to see it be more of a 'yes, and' situation."

**Are you trying to change or improve public policy?** An interviewer commented that when the Citizens League was at its prime, study committees heard from community voices and then came up with a proposal. "People who made public policy, primarily the Minnesota Legislature, often adopted what we proposed," she said. If you're trying to change public policy, you have to give politicians something that tells them what to do. "*MinnPost* ought to help us figure out how to deal with public-policy issues, like diversity in Minnesota, with an outcome that tells public policymakers what to do."

Wallmeyer responded that *MinnPost* is not an advocacy organization and it never will be. "We'll advocate that people should be informed and engaged, but that's about as far as I expect you'll see us go," he said. "We're not going to tell people who or what to vote for." Setting the agenda by deciding what we're going to cover is an opportunity for *MinnPost*, and we see our most important role in the broader conversation as fact-finding and truth-telling.

The interviewer agreed that *MinnPost* shouldn't advocate on issues. "But there are public-policy decisions that come from good information," she said.

***MinnPost* sees itself as a statewide media outlet.** Wallmeyer gave that response to an interviewer's question about whether *MinnPost* views itself as metro-focused or Minnesota-focused. "Our focus is the state," he said. "We have specific beats that are geared toward covering outstate issues. Could we do that better? Of course we could." He said he hoped within two months, *MinnPost* would be able to make an announcement about expanding its outstate coverage.

"We are passionately committed to a mission that serves the people and the interests of the entire state of Minnesota," he said. "And we know we could do that better than we do today."

**We shouldn't think a small team of experts can, by itself, come up with the best answer to a public-policy problem.** Instead, Wallmeyer believes we need to have "a more inclusive civic dialogue that involves more of the state and helps break through some of those filter bubbles and is structured in a way that encourages intelligent, respectful, informed discourse."

**The most important thing in encouraging people to communicate across their differences is getting through the filter bubble.** Wallmeyer said that's a role the media have an opportunity to play. Years back, he said, in the days of the monolithic metro newspaper, everybody had the same front page and one of three TV newscasts. In that way, the media helped set a common agenda for the entire community.

While that agenda-setting power has diminished, the media have greater opportunities to go out and have smart conversations with people who represent different geographies and cultures, he said. By doing that, media outlets can improve civic discourse by helping people understand perspectives that are different from their own.

**Conservatives have a valid critique of mainstream media that the people who are publishing and reporting are coming dominantly from one side of the political perspective.** Wallmeyer said he believes there is truth in that statement and that a lack of political diversity doesn't engender the great conversations. "Even if the reporters and publishers are well intentioned and do their best to 'call it down the middle'—and I believe they are—those with different points of view are likely to have differing views on where the 'middle' is. Reporters and publishers with the same point of view are less



likely to correct their internal confirmation biases—a bias all people have—if they're not sitting next to someone with a slightly different perspective on where the middle is." He said he thinks about the value of ensuring a range of diverse perspectives—and not only in political terms—when looking at the composition of *MinnPost's* staff.

**There's a kinship with *MinnPost* in what the Civic Caucus values and its view of a path to a better Minnesota.** "I really like what you're doing and what you're trying to do," Wallmeyer said. "I'm happy to keep this conversation going."