

Summary of Meeting with Steve Dornfeld

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Thursday, August 2, 2007

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and John Rollwagen

Guest Speaker: Steve Dornfeld, veteran newspaper writer, editor, and columnist

A. Context of the meeting --Today's meeting is part of the Civic Caucus' continuing inquiry into the future of quality public affairs information in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

B. Introduction and welcome --Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Steve Dornfeld, our guest speaker. Steve Dornfeld joined the Metropolitan Council in 2003 as director of public affairs after working for more than three decades as a newspaper reporter and editor, focusing primarily on government and public policy.

Dornfeld spent more than 20 years at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, the last dozen years on the opinion pages as an editorial writer, columnist and editor. He previously served as Washington correspondent, national/foreign editor and deputy metro editor, when he directed political and governmental coverage.

Before joining the Pioneer Press, Dornfeld worked for 10 years as a state Capitol and political reporter for the Minneapolis Tribune. He is a past president of the national Society of Professional Journalists and the Minnesota News Council.

C. Comments and discussion --During Dornfeld's remarks and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Younger Americans not following the news --Dornfeld recalls he helped the University of St. Thomas with a conference a couple of years ago that highlighted the issues in David T. C. Mindich's book: *Tuned Out, Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*. He believes the democracy is seriously threatened by disinterest. Trying to find a young person following public affairs is like searching for Waldo.

2. Change in news emphasis, not in volume --Dornfeld recalled that he started with the *Pioneer Press* in 1966 with the metropolitan beat and moved in 1970 to the *Star Tribune*. He recalls that the space dedicated to news wasn't any larger than today, but a lot more of the news as serious public affairs. He recalls that the team of journalists assigned to the Legislature would divide up the subject matter at the beginning of a legislative session. They would follow stories closely and then follow up with analysis articles on weekends. The journalists reported regularly on the status of bills as they moved through committees. He remembers that sometimes he'd have three to five bylined stories of his own in an issue of the paper. Today it's unusual to see three to five bylined legislative stories in total.

3. Change in the attitude of editors --He remembers a long list of good editors, including Debbie Howell, Chuck Bailey, Frank Premack and Frank Wright, who had distinguished themselves in public affairs reporting and editing. Dornfeld recalls

specifically that Premack had him go to "school" in the fall of 1970 on the issues of school finance, so that he could report those issues intelligently. A change in recent years has occurred as many editors no longer are serious journalists, but marketing executives.

4. Difficulty in finding news as a basis for writing editorials --In the 1990s, Dornfeld was writing editorials. Often the news side of the paper wouldn't be providing coverage of an area where Dornfeld wanted to write an editorial. He'd complain about lack of news coverage and receive replies such as, "Why cover that bill? It's not going anywhere." So Dornfeld would have to resort to using the editorial page for providing background on an issue as well as opinion.

5. The critical watchdog role of the press has diminished --Dornfeld recalls that as a reporter he knew that City Councils would try to delay discussion of controversial issues until the press left the room. Thus, he'd often wait until 2 a.m. when the governing body would finally take up the issues that they didn't want to address in presence of the press.

He knows that editors have problems with a new generation of readers and with more competition for advertising and circulation dollars. But there's still a critical need for public affairs coverage to which Dornfeld has dedicated his working life. The press keeps the government officials accountable.

Newspapers are using the excuse that they can't afford the journalism of the past. The *Star Tribune* had an 18 percent return on investment and the *Pioneer Press* a 9-10 percent return last year, but those amounts weren't enough to satisfy the owners. He doesn't think that John Cowles, Sr., past long term owner of the *Star Tribune* ever had to receive a 20-25 percent return each year.

6. Response to Joel Kramer's proposal --Dornfeld has read about Kramer's proposal for a non-profit, online, serious public affairs news effort. While Dornfeld himself doesn't heavily use the internet for news, he knows younger people do--and Dornfeld has two teenaged sons. In response to a question Dornfeld agreed that today's young readers are not likely to read the same articles that Dornfeld himself wrote some 30 years ago. Younger people want things to be light and interactive, he said. Nevertheless, Dornfeld believes that you still could find ways to engage younger readers in issues about the school aid formula.

7. Young people are communicating more, just in different ways --In the discussion a member noted that while young people might not be reading what we wish they were reading, they certainly are keeping in touch with others almost continually. The night before last, when the bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, this member was out to dinner with family members, including a teenaged daughter. Unbeknownst to the rest of the family, the daughter was busily text messaging friends beneath the table cloth during the conversation. Suddenly, the daughter informed the group around the table that the 35W bridge over the Mississippi had just collapsed.

8. Lack of interest in public affairs --Dornfeld recalled that he encountered major difficulties with students to whom he was teaching public affairs reporting at the University of Minnesota a few years ago. He would occasionally administer "tests" about their knowledge of basic information, such as the number of U. S. Senators or the

name of the Chief Justice of the United States. He always was concerned because results of the tests indicated significant lack of knowledge. He's subsequently raised the issue with high school social science teachers.

9. Possibilities of other print media --A member asked Dornfeld whether other types of publications might be explored, such as a quarterly public affairs magazine. Dornfeld replied that some such efforts are under way, such as *Minnesota Law and Politics*, a monthly journal of legal and political issues and opinions.

10. Preoccupation with "negativity" --A member commented that coverage by traditional media today of public affairs issues seems to be overly negative--some kind of accusation of wrong-doing always seems to be present.

11. Possible other ways to provide coverage of the Metropolitan Council -- In response to a question Dornfeld said the traditional media aren't interested in writing about the longer range land use, transportation and parks plans of the Metropolitan Council. This discussion led to the question of the interest of certain new media, such as the *Twin Cities Daily Planet* that might willingly pick up releases from the Metropolitan Council. Moreover, it was noted, that perhaps the Council could even think about distributing its news releases directly to interested individuals and groups. Once email addresses are inserted, distributing news releases to large numbers of people via email costs virtually nothing. Another member said that a news release captured in Google, even if not picked up by the media, will still show up on a search of key words.

12. Question of a one-newspaper town --Dornfeld always has felt that competition is a good thing. If you had one newspaper, he fears news from the eastern part of the metro area would be neglected. The best examples today of good City Hall coverage are from the neighborhood newspapers, he said. He cited the *Highland Villager* in St. Paul and the *Southwest Journal* in Minneapolis.

13. Interests of young people --Returning to a discussion of young people's interest in news and public affairs, one person said that life is so intense and filled with so much activity for young people. Their entire lives seem to be a buzz. Much is going on. At the national level candidates have created a conversation on the internet. We know that candidates must watch what they say even if, technically, professional reporters might not be present. We know that whoever is present at a discussion has the ability to circulate comments widely. A member said that what is missing in that kind of coverage is objective reporting.

The recent CNN debate among presidential candidates is another example of the ability of younger people to show interest and ask good questions, a member said.

Dornfeld replied that we still need professional journalists with good background. He recalled the difficulty the Metropolitan Council had in explaining its position on health care costs for bus drivers during a strike two years ago. Turnover among reporters, particularly TV reporters, is very high today, he said.

It also was noted, however, that the facts leading to a story about needing to rebuild the Washington Avenue bridge to accommodate light rail came from information generated by a non-professional "reporter".

14. Potential impact from non-profit outlets --A member commented again about the potential of an internet-based, non-profit news outlet for Minnesota, perhaps Minnesota Public Radio's efforts or perhaps the proposal by Joel Kramer a couple of weeks ago. Another member noted the success of such an outlet in San Diego, www.voiceofsandiego.com. Another example, www.politico.com, was also mentioned.

Dornfeld recalled that on election night 2006 he simultaneously was watching TV, listening to MPR and looking at the Minnesota Secretary of State's website. With those three outlets in front of him--particularly the Secretary of State's website--Dornfeld said he had the best coverage of anyone.

15. Thanks --On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne Johnson thanked Dornfeld for meeting with us today.