

## Summary of Meeting on the Role of the Media

Civic Caucus  
8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437  
Friday, March 9, 2007

Attendance: Verne Johnson, chair; Lee Canning (by phone), Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

**Guest speakers:** Journalistic roundtable, including **Gary Gilson**, former journalist, retired director and current consultant, Minnesota News Council; **Dave Nimmer**, former journalist, currently on the journalism faculty, University of St. Thomas; **Jim Shoop**, former journalist, retired director of public relations, Carleton College, **Lee Canning**, former journalist and retired publisher, suburban newspapers, and **Paul Gilje**, former journalist, retired fund-raiser. Canning and Gilje serve on the core group for the Civic Caucus.

**A. Context of the meeting--**The Civic Caucus has been exploring the issue of polarization and paralysis in Minnesota governmental bodies. Today the Civic Caucus is discussing the question of public affairs information and its relationship to a representative democracy.

**B. Introductions--** Paul introduced the speakers. Between 1960 and 1964, he said, all five had worked together at the old Minneapolis Star.

**C. Change in publisher at *Star Tribune*--**To get the meeting going Verne invited the speakers to comment on the announcement this week that Par Ridder, publisher of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, has been named publisher of the *Star Tribune*.

**1. Respecting historical allegiances--** Canning feels that the change makes it less likely that the *Star Tribune* will violate the historical tendency of each paper to respect the other's territory. He sees no change in the tendency of the papers to give first emphasis to entertainment. In response to a question Canning said he doesn't think the change will result in the *Star Tribune* trying to push the *Pioneer Press* out.

**2. Possibly some openness to improvement--** Nimmer said that Ridder has been a supporter of the program at St. Thomas to bring more low-income youth and youth of color into journalism. Nimmer said we shouldn't write off the *Pioneer Press*. It has some top new veterans in leadership roles. Ridder, he said, might be open to creative ideas for strengthening public affairs coverage.

**3. Disintegration of the audience--** Shoop said "the canary ate the whale". It's symptomatic of what's happening in general to the news business. Challenges are so great. The audience has spread in so many directions, what with cable television and blogs, for example. He wonders whether anyone is covering the Legislature on a fulltime basis. St. Paul, he said, has a hard core of loyalist readers and he thinks that will provide impetus to keep the St. Paul paper going. The fact that the *Star Tribune* is now controlled by an investment company means we can expect the current owners will sell the paper again as soon as they have instituted economies.

**4. Management changes aren't the big story--** Gilson said it appears to him that managers are interchangeable. The real story is bigger than the managers. It's the declining audience. He noted how the mainstream TV channels in the Twin Cities area are trying to tailor their news coverage to be more inter-active and heavily entertainment oriented. He is not optimistic that it will be possible for the media to climb back up to the place where public affairs coverage really means something. He recalled that a recent editor of the *Star Tribune* said he was bored by coverage of government. There are papers that still do a good job, Gilson said. He singled out the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Because of retirements the *Star Tribune* shortly will lose 24 or 25 people, with long histories in the area, Gilson said. If they are replaced, it will be by lower-paid newcomers. The community is losing a tremendous resource.

**D. Agreement on decline in quality and quantity of public affairs information--**

Verne said that before we go further today we should test the extent of agreement that public affairs coverage has declined significantly. All speakers agreed. Jim Hetland asked why specialists (beat reporters) are disappearing. Canning replied that you will find specialists today in entertainment and sports. Nimmer recalled that four months ago the *Star Tribune* published a major article on the best drinking establishments for different groups of people. The various audiences already knew where to go, he said. Can you imagine, Nimmer asked, how much time and energy and resources were spent in that effort?

**E. Impact on the political process--** Verne asked whether the decline in public affairs coverage is affecting the political process.

**1. Absence of reporters looking over the shoulders of politicians--** Shoop said that the presence of reporters makes elected officials more responsible. In the absence of reporters, things can slide through. If the public isn't paying attention, the elected officials feel less of a sense of responsibility. Shoop said the trend is widespread. One-third of *Newsweek* magazine is lifestyle now, he said. Apparently, people have turned inward and are interested only in themselves.

Nimmer recalled that between 1963 and 1988, no alderman in Minneapolis was indicted. Four reporters were covering city hall regularly. In the last decade three aldermen have been indicted and convicted. It's not just crime, he said. No one has looked at the civil service system in Minneapolis in the last 15 years.

**2. Public affairs never was heavily read--** Canning said that reporting on government never ranked high on readership. He recalled that "Dear Abby" used to attract the biggest audience. Not more than 8 percent of subscribers ever read the editorial page, he said. But in those days the economics were different and papers could appeal to a small audience.

Canning said the papers are much thinner and have eliminated anything that doesn't appeal to the broad audience. He sees very little potential for improvement in the traditional media. They will simply do what they can to stay alive. He remembered remembers that in 1961 circulation of the Minneapolis *Star* was 320,000. The *Tribune* was a separate paper with its own circulation. Today, the combined newspaper circulation is about 350,000. Meanwhile the population of the metropolitan area has tripled or quadrupled. Penetration of the market was about 80 percent in the 1960s and

now is down to about 35 percent. The daily newspaper is a very weak member of the media today, Canning said.

**4. Consequences of inadequate coverage--** Gilson said he can hardly believe that the newspapers didn't report last year during the Twins stadium debate that a price on the land was still in dispute. Had those facts been known at the time the bill passed, the problems today might have been avoided.

**5. Look at Twin Cities Daily Planet--** Gilson urged that we look at a new online paper, the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, that heavily emphasizes neighborhood news, but that could cover regional public affairs, too. The *Daily Planet* received a grant to get started. Jeremy Iggers, formerly with the *Star Tribune*, is active in the *Daily Planet*.

**6. Some bright spots--** Gilson said that Robert Crowich, formerly of National Public Radio, who now works for ABC News, knows how to explain complicated topics in interesting and clear ways. Gilson said somehow we need to develop more people with a pursuit of excellence. Asked about the performance of journalism schools, Gilson said the best teachers are frustrated by a lack of vision on the part of students.

**7. Permanent decline is irreversible?--** Verne said that it appears that the decline in the traditional media is irreversible and that some new strategies need to be developed. Canning replied that the media are in a state of flux. Relying on one branch will kill you. Verne said that at a minimum we need to get the media question back on our menu of problems with the political process.

**8. Look to a variety of other media--** Gilson suggested that *City Pages*, *Law & Politics*, the *Rake* magazine, *Twin Cities Business Monthly*, *Finance and Commerce*, and other specialized publications have a definite role to play.

**9. WCCO and the environment--** Lest we totally despair over the traditional media, Nimmer said the Don Shelby afternoon show on radio focuses heavily on environmental issues, because of Shelby's interest, and that program now is drawing more audience than its competitors.

In terms of new outlets, Nimmer wonders whether a Par Ridder might be receptive to a suggestion for a nightly cable news show on public affairs. Verne wondered what kind of incentive Ridder would need to do that.

**10. Interest of younger people--** Jim Hetland noted that young people today don't read newspapers or watch TV news programs. He'd like to know whether young people aren't interested in public information, irrespective of its source. Shoop replied that people are interested in what affects them personally. He sees a lack of a common concern today. In the years immediately following World War II there was a broad interest in education and about suburban development, Shoop said. So you could easily write about those topics and know there was a common concern. Shoop also wondered if a change in outlook has occurred among elected officials. Did they formerly have a greater interest in serving the common good than today?

**11. Contributions by responsible bloggers--** Gilson highlighted what he considers to be a quality blog written by Eric Black, a veteran reporter at the *Star Tribune*. The discussion turned briefly to whether blogs are essentially personal

editorial pages. Are there blogs, for example, that simply try to lay out the facts of a situation? One person commented that bloggers often will state things without attribution. Attribution always has been an essential aspect in reporting, Shoop said, because reliable news was dependent upon the authority of the person being quoted.

**12. Reliability of new information sources--**The discussion briefly touched on the question of how information can be thought to be reliable in today's environment. The example of Wikipedia was cited. Wikipedia is a contributor-driven, on-line encyclopedia. Some persons present were skeptical, because they didn't know tests for reliability of Wikipedia information.

**13. Change in community leadership role of the newspapers--** In years past the owners of the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* were actively involved in making their communities better. Ownership now has no such interest.

**14. Thanks--** On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked our speakers for meeting with us today.