



NORTHERN ILLINOIS NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

www.northernstar.info/nina

News, networking, training opportunities, a job hunter's guide, high school journalism resources and more.

Journalism can never be silent: that is its greatest virtue and its greatest fault. It must speak, and speak immediately, while the echoes of wonder, the claims of triumph and the signs of horror are still in the air.



Henry Grunwald
Editor, TIME magazine
1922-2005

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Route to:

- Publisher
Managing Ed.
Newsroom
Advertising
Circulation

Where theory meets readers

Ottawa-Streator merger tests readership ideas

Editor's note: On Oct. 28, Mary Nesbitt and Rich Somerville from The Readership Institute conducted a workshop as part of NINA's Fall Conference. Rather than simply reporting on what they talked about, instead we'll take you inside one newspaper that was already putting much of their advice into practice.

By Lonny Cain

At this writing it has been 14 weeks, six days, 12 hours and 25 minutes ... but who's counting?

Just let it be known that on Sept. 1, 2005, we turned our world upside down. Make that two worlds: Ottawa and Streator. On that magic day, we did the following:

- We changed the 161-year history of The Daily Times in Ottawa by shelving the name of the paper.
We merged The Daily Times with The Times-Press in Streator, also putting a new branch on its family tree. The new newspaper is now called The Times.
We merged two newspaper staffs into one.
We totally redesigned and created a new paper to provide four sections daily with a format to attract younger readers and follow the guidelines so clearly spelled out by the Readership Institute. (See www.readership.org.)

Any newsroom that has made major changes, usually in design and packaging, knows how well readers adapt. Many do, of course, with praises like, "Amazing."



But there also are many (the ones who are more vocal) who offer the predictable negative critiques: "Can't find anything anymore." ... "The type is too small." (When it was not changed.) ... "Who cares about Britney Spears?"

At The Times, our changes were overwhelming. We are giving readers not just a new look. It's a new newspaper. We are now more regional, a paper for the county. And most important, we are trying to rethink how we report (and define) the news.

Those who attended the recent NINA conference heard the message that

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Don't wait for an invitation to help high school journalists

By Randy Swikle

Our local newspaper just unveiled its redesign, and it is profound. Each page has new momentum that propels readers through information in absorbing, time-saving ways.

The cost of launching the redesign project must have been significant, but the dividends are sure to pay off. By better serving the readers, the newspaper better serves its own commercial interests, too.

Another project that every local newspaper should implement is less expensive, also profound, and potentially will pay big dividends. Let's call it The 45-Word Initiative Project and launch it in every school in the circulation area.

The 45 words of the First Amendment affect newspapers more than redesign, technological innovations, convergence and all other delivery issues of journalism combined. For without the First Amendment, news is less credible and delivery issues are more inconsequential.

It is in the best interest of every newspaper to take initiative in protecting the sanctity of the First Amendment. What better place to begin than in schools, where First Amendment awareness has eroded alarmingly?

Last year, a million-dollar, nationwide survey sponsored by the Knight Foundation revealed discouraging data. Researchers concluded: "It appears, in fact, that our nation's high schools are failing their students when it comes to instilling in them appreciation for the First Amendment."

Local newspapers shouldn't wait for an invitation from area schools. They should take initiative and volunteer their services.

Here are 10 examples of what a newspaper representative or team can do:

- Review the journalism curriculum and volunteer the newspaper's resources toward helping students understand the First Amendment's concepts and then to better appreciate how they impact society.
- Partner with a student newspaper staff by engaging students in activities such as "shadow-a-pro," attending a news budget meeting and consulting with professional editors on journalistic issues.

- Become a more authoritative voice by learning scholastic press law and how students may control the content of their publications.

- Build a relationship with school officials and help them understand strategies for nurturing a free and responsible student press in their schools.

- Serve as an advocate for the First Amendment rights of students by providing guidance, press coverage and support when student rights are denied.

- Reinforce the teacher/publication adviser by showing students how First Amendment rights are balanced with responsibilities.

- Share ethical dilemmas and how they were resolved by your newspaper, and compare and contrast those dilemmas with ones faced by the student newspaper.

- Visit social studies and English classrooms as a chance for professional journalists to discuss why students should care about the First Amendment.

- Identify schools that do not have a student newspaper; show them the value a student newspaper offers to the community; and provide seed money or other incentives to encourage the creation of a free and responsible student press.

- Sponsor workshops, assemblies, and other activities that advance awareness and appreciation of the First Amendment.

The values and habits that young people develop now will influence their attitudes and behavior toward the news media and the First Amendment as adults.

Soon, a new generation of newspaper readers will feel either passion or indifference toward the First Amendment. That public attitude toward what is a cornerstone of democracy and protector of enlightenment may well be determined, at least in part, by the investment newspapers are making in our schools now.

It is in the best interests of newspapers to take the initiative.



Randy Swikle taught journalism at Johnsburg High School for 34 years. He now serves as Illinois Director of the Journalism Education Association. Contact him at randyswikle@comcast.net.

BOARD MEMBERS

Colin O'Donnell, President

Daily Herald
847-427-4551 / codonnell@dailyherald.com

Greg Rivara, 1st V.P.

Kane County Chronicle
630-232-9255 / grivara@kcochronicle.com

Rich Rostron, 2nd V.P.

Woodstock Independent
815-338-8040 / inde@inde-news.com

Joe Corrado, Past President

Corrado Communications
corradocom@comcast.net

Lois Self, Executive Secretary

NIU Department of Communication
815-753-7028 / lself@niu.edu

Jim Slonoff, Treasurer

Doings Newspapers, Hinsdale
630-371-0348 / jslonoff@pioneerlocal.com

Jim Killam,

Communications Coordinator

Northern Star (NIU)
815-753-4239 / jkillam@niu.edu

Sharon Boehlefeld

The Journal-Standard, Freeport
815-232-0168 / sharon.boehlefeld@journalstandard.com

Lonny Cain

Ottawa Daily Times
815-433-2000 / lonnyc@mywebtimes.com

Jay Dickerson

Galena Gazette
815-777-0019 / editor@galgazette.com

John Etheredge

Ledger-Sentinel, Oswego
630-554-8573 / ledgersentinel@compuserve.com

Wally Haas

Rockford Register Star
815-987-1359 / whaas@rockford.gannett.com

Pamela Lannom

Doings Newspapers, Hinsdale
630-371-0516 / plannom@pioneerlocal.com

Tom Martin

Galesburg Register-Mail
309-343-7181 / tmartin@register-mail.com

Rick Nagel

The Beacon News, Aurora
630-844-5840 / rnagel@scn1.com

Pete Nenni

Lake County Bureau, Daily Herald
847-680-5510 / pnenni@dailyherald.com

Jeanine Otto

Sauk Valley Newspapers
815-625-3600 / jotto@svnmail.com

Roger Ruthhart

The Rock Island Argus
309-786-6441 / rriroger@qonline.com

Randy Swikle

Johnsburg High School
815-385-9233 / randyswikle@comcast.net

Penny Wiegert

The Observer / Rockford Diocese
815-399-4300 / PWiegert@rockforddiocese.org

Staff: Dana Dittrichs-Kunkel

NIU Communication Department secretary
815-753-1564 / ddittrichs@niu.edu

TIMES

From Page 1

we have been hearing for months — and now are trying to implement. In fact, Rich Somerville, one of the NINA speakers on Oct. 28, has been working with our paper (and The Small Newspaper Group) to share with us what he did as editor at The Union, a small daily in Grass Valley, California. He increased readership and circulation numbers by beating the readership drum.

So, what have we done that is worth watching?

Our mission was to make the newspaper easier to read, more relevant to the lives and daily experiences of our targeted readers, and useful. Again, the strategy is to give nonreaders or the less frequent readers more reason to pick up the newspaper. In theory, the frequent (loyal) readers will stay on board.

Design factors to meet these goals included:

- Four sections with process fronts: the A section (packed with local), Life, Sports and Classified.

- The front page and section fronts are designed to pop with color, more graphics, and cover stories that fit the Readership.org mantra.

- Page 1 has several roundup items that also take the reader inside for more details.

- A listing of obit names on Page 1 with full obits inside.

- “Up Next” promos on Page 1 for stories coming in future editions.

- No jumps allowed anywhere except one from Page 1 (with occasional exceptions).

- An open Page 3 that is all local including a “spotlight” news feature with photo, a daily Town Watch column (datelines from across the county), and an “Ask The Times” column that allows readers to ask anything and we answer.

- Dominant labels on every story that clearly show datelines or subject matter.

- The addition of columns designed to be useful and relevant (local cooking columns, The Everyday Cheapskate, Supermarket Sampler, video game and movie reviews, etc.).

The design, of course, must be fed

Excerpts from letters to the editor since the merger:



“Not enough Streator news. I don’t care about towns north of Ottawa.”

“We don’t know Streator people nor do they know us. It’s all mixed up. Nothing against them. Just prefer the paper as it was previously.”

“Eliminate Sections C and D. Save lots of money. It’s a waste to advertise because the ads and sports aren’t read.”

“Love the color and look of the paper. Lots to read.”



daily by a newsroom that has been asked to rethink how it reports and writes.

With the help of Rich Somerville (r-somerville@mediaforesight.org), we are changing how we define news — and find news. In his words, too many newsrooms just pick off the low-hanging fruit because it’s there, it’s easy, and it’s what we’ve always done. This commodity news includes meetings, news releases, the stuff that walks in the door. All this has value and needs to be printed, but it’s not what readers will be talking about after they read the paper tonight.

So, the best stories are F-U-R-E. That means fun, useful, relevant enterprise stories. Moreover, we try to reflect the lifestyle experiences of the readers we want. They want stories that make them feel smarter, give them something to talk about that they care about, and remind them that someone (that’s us) is looking out for their interests.

Instead of reporting or finding stories from the same sources all the time, we are trying to report from the bottom up. First, find out who cares about what and why and then take their issues to the top for answers.

Don’t wait for an issue to finally — maybe — be put on a meeting agenda somewhere.

We redefined all of our beats. Yes, the secondary beats that deal with the city councils and school boards are still there, but the primary beats that drive those cover stories are now revolving around issues that are relevant to readers.

For example: We now have a beat simply called “growth and economy.” Growth was the one clear issue that everyone underlined across the county. The reporter on this beat was nervous about finding enough material. Then he started looking at demographics and crunching numbers and began a flow of stories that has not stopped. He has been producing stories that we only referred to or danced around before. Nothing shocking, but certainly relevant and never really reported with any depth before. Some of the headlines: “Where’s the wealth?” (mapping household income by townships) ... “Peru leads among area towns in daily population shift” ... “Pillow tax pumping Utica” ... “More homes selling at higher prices in LaSalle County.”

Complicating our effort is the fact that the Streator market was absorbed. The Times-Press came out three days a week. That area now gets a daily except Sunday. Residents there are the most outspoken about the changes. They want more Streator news in “their” newspaper. Other readers in other parts of the county want less Streator news. Yes, there are subscribers canceling for this reason, but we expect most of them to return. And yes, there are younger readers signing up for the new paper. They like it.

We are asking our readers (and the newsroom) to swallow a lot of change in one big gulp. We still need to let the ink dry, so to speak, and then study the numbers. It’s way too early to say what is working and what is not. After all, it’s only been 14 weeks, six days, 13 hours and 55 minutes.



Lonny Cain is managing editor of The Times in Ottawa, Ill. Contact him at lonnyc@mywebtimes.com.

Young journalists fuel optimism

By Joe Corrado
2005 NINA PRESIDENT

I'll remember 2005 as a year in which journalists not only wrote the headlines, but made them, too.

We saw one reporter (Judith Miller) go to jail for not revealing sources, a popular columnist/author (Mitch Albom) admit to playing loose with facts, and one of the most respected names in investigative journalism (Bob Woodward) come under fire as a probe into the public identification of a CIA operative dug deeper. On TV, Dan Rather left his anchor's chair following a dustup dirtier than a Texas twister, and we also said goodbye to Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel.

But as I think back over the year, the journalists I keep coming back to are 35 you've probably never heard of ... though I'd wager it'll be only a few years before that changes.

This past spring, I was among the judges in the Northern Illinois Newspaper Association's annual scholarship contest for high school seniors. I remember paging through clip after clip, letter after letter, realizing that many of these teens had as much – or in some cases more – talent and drive than some professionals I've worked with. As a result, we stepped up our awards and gave a record six scholarships worth a total \$1,750 donated by NINA and three area newspapers.

NINA's goals always have been to advance print journalism and print journalism education and training in northern Illinois. As president, I've seen us take on new efforts to live up to that mission, thanks to the dedication of fellow NINA board members.

We expanded our annual contest this year with a new category, religion writing, named in honor of longtime NINA board member Owen Phelps. We again provided affordable training opportunities. And, with our fledgling relationship with the Kettle Moraine Press Association, we've stepped up our commitment to high school journalism.

As I move aside to welcome new President Colin O'Donnell, I know NINA is in good hands. And as I recall those 35 aspiring reporters, I know journalism is as well.



Joe Corrado, a former editor with Suburban Chicago Newspapers, now owns Corrado Communications, based in Lake Zurich. Contact him at corradow@comcast.net.

NINA offers a support system

By Colin O'Donnell
2006 NINA PRESIDENT

At the end of each meeting of the Northern Illinois Newspaper Association, board members get a chance to brag a little. We call it Shop Talk and it was started almost five years by our 2001 president, Lonny Cain.

I was new to the board then and I enjoyed hearing of the challenges and the successes other newspapers were experiencing. It helped me realize that while we may compete in ways, we really are all in this together.

And that's why belonging to an organization like NINA is so important. I'm hoping that as you read this, you too are a member of NINA or will join this year.

We offer different ways to get involved and learn what is happening in the industry. I don't subscribe to the theory that newspapers are dying, even in the face of declining circulation nationwide and the reductions in staff being announced on a regular basis. I do believe that newspapers that aren't constantly striving to get better and to do things differently will find it difficult to survive.

At NINA, we strive to bring you affordable seminars offered close to home that address topics that will help you do a better job. Last year, we offered programs on headline writing aimed at grabbing readers and pulling them into your stories. We also brought in industry experts to talk about declining readership and what's happening nationwide to combat it.

With our affiliation with Northern Illinois University, we also have a commitment to journalism education. Our scholarship awards program is thriving and in many cases we team up with local newspapers to reward top local high school journalists.

We are always looking for new ways to make our organization even more relevant to your newsrooms. I'm especially interested in hearing what programs you are interested in attending and other ways you'd like us to help you navigate the difficult waters newspapers are facing today.



Colin O'Donnell is Vice President / Operations and Planning for the Daily Herald, Arlington Heights. Contact him at codonnell@dailyherald.com or 847-427-4551.

CALENDAR

Friday, Jan. 20

NINA committees and full board meeting, 9 and 10 a.m., the Northern Star, NIU-DeKalb.

Friday, Feb. 17

Illinois College Press Association Job Fair, 9 a.m., Holiday Inn City Centre, 300 E. Ohio St., Chicago. More than 100 of Illinois' top college journalists are available for interviews. Employer registration is free! Contact Chris Richert, job fair coordinator, at Columbia College, 312-344-7432, crichtert@colum.edu.

Saturday, Feb. 25

Northern Star Hall of Fame Induction Dinner, Altgeld Hall, NIU. For details contact Jim Killam, 815-753-4239, jkillam@niu.edu.

Aug. 24-27

The Society of Professional Journalists holds its national convention at the Hyatt Regency Chicago. Info: www.spj.org

Friday, Oct. 27

NINA Fall Conference and Awards Luncheon, NIU-DeKalb.

Watch our Web site for more upcoming NINA workshops in 2006.