

WINTER 2010

# NINA

NORTHERN ILLINOIS NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION

COMMUNITY  
JOURNALISM  
LIVES

SEE PAGE 3



The smarter the journalists are, the better off society is. ... People read the press to inform themselves — and the better the teacher, the better the student body.



Warren Buffett

## 'DIGITAL INK' BLOG

[www.ninaonline.org](http://www.ninaonline.org)

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Route to:

- Publisher
- Managing Ed.
- Newsroom
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# Access Northern Illinois

*Help make 2010 a year  
of open government*

**Mike Cetera**  
INCOMING PRESIDENT

The weak economy has seen our industry shed jobs, news hole and paying readers, creating a difficult atmosphere for many newsrooms. Yet these losses may have given us something as well: a unique opportunity to re-examine our mission and reinvent ourselves.

We must ask, how best can we be relevant? One answer is to redouble our efforts to hold accountable the public officials who spend taxpayers' money.

While trained journalists perhaps are best equipped to monitor whether politicians are upholding the public trust, our industry challenges have made this calling more difficult. But we also face obstacles put up by those we cover.

At the December meeting of the Northern Illinois Newspaper Association board, I proposed we look at public information and how we get it as a broad theme for 2010. The idea was born out of a concern there has been an erosion of access.

As an example, one long-standing tool of the trade – the police scanner – may become obsolete as some police and fire departments move to more secure networks and shut out journalists in the process. When we can no longer hear about that fire, accident or arrest, can we possibly do our jobs as well?

### NEED HELP WITH AN ACCESS QUESTION?

Try the Illinois Attorney General's Office.

The contact person is:

Cara Smith

Public Access Counselor

Office of the Illinois Attorney General

500 S. 2nd Street

Springfield, Illinois 62706

Phone: 312-814-5526 or 1-877-299-FOIA

Fax: 217-782-1396

E-mail: [PublicAccess@atg.state.il.us](mailto:PublicAccess@atg.state.il.us)

Also check out [www.ninaonline.org](http://www.ninaonline.org) for an often-updated list of helpful access links.

In 2010, NINA would like to offer training sessions that address problems with access. But we need your help. Have you noticed that government layoffs have made getting your questions answered more difficult? Are local governments following FOIA laws in getting you information the public is entitled to know? Are your local boards properly following the Open Meetings Act?

Please share your experiences in these and all areas of access to help NINA make 2010 the year of open government.



Mike Cetera, NINA's 2010 president, is the senior interactive editor for Sun-Times Media's Suburban West Division in Aurora. Contact him at [mcetera@suntimes.com](mailto:mcetera@suntimes.com) or 630-978-8381.

# Moving forward in tough year

**By Pete Nenni**

OUTGOING PRESIDENT

The most challenging year in recent memory for the news media in general, and newspapers in particular, was equally as challenging for NINA board members.

Our newsrooms suffered through the same tight budgets, staff and expense cutbacks and advertising revenue declines. Our employees, like yours, scrambled to create products in print and online that would make us useful, relevant and necessary to readers.

In short, we shared your pain.

Sadly, we have no magic bullet to combat the weak economy and ongoing shifts in readership.

And, like you, NINA was forced to think out of the box in 2009. Our mission was to identify different approaches to training and conveying critical information to meet the needs of our members.

Some of those efforts included:

- The Spring Conference, which focused on "The New Basics" and featured a panel discussion aimed at showing journalists what they can do to save and advance their career.

The Chicago Tribune's Ray Long talked about how he uses social networking Web sites to promote his work and build audience; Barbara Vitello of the Daily Herald discussed her switch from the features desk to the courthouse and how it has made her a more valuable asset to the newspaper; and Denise Schoenbachler, dean of the Northern Illinois University College of Business, brought a business perspective about adapting to an uncertain career path.

- NINA communications coordinator Jim Killam, the adviser for NIU's daily student media, the Northern Star, expanded the use and reach of Digital Ink, NINA's blog. There, he created and fostered discussions on some of the most pressing issues facing our industry. For the first time, NINA also offered free

listings on its Web site for job seekers.

- NINA offered a Webinar training for the first time when we arranged a discounted fee for members to participate in the Poynter Institute's NewsU Facebook for Journalists discussion. It provided insight into using the popular social networking tool.

- Recognizing the cost and time constraints facing our members, NINA changed the traditional format of our Fall Conference. Instead of a half-day training program, the event featured an evening dinner and keynote speaker George Papajohn, of the Chicago Tribune, who discussed the critical need for the media to continue its watchdog role.

While we sought new approaches to training and presenting information, we didn't abandon our most important traditions.

We again honored great journalism in the annual awards program, and we continued to support the future of the industry by helping high school journalists pursue their careers. NINA honored five talent high school journalists in its 12th annual scholarship competition. A total of \$1,400 in scholarships was awarded.

And, that leads us to 2010.

To be sure, the New Year will be no less challenging. Our members will still be required to be vigilant in finding ways to provide meaningful coverage to communities and reach out to readers.

The NINA board, under new president Mike Cetera, will use responses to a 2009 survey of members to develop programs to help support you in the effort.

It's an exciting time and we want you to look to NINA as a resource in meeting that challenge.



Pete Nenni, NINA's 2009 president, is the Lake County editor of the Daily Herald in Libertyville. Contact him at pnenni@dailyherald.com or (847) 680-5510.

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Have an idea for a NINA workshop?

Let us know!

E-mail: [jkillam@niu.edu](mailto:jkillam@niu.edu)

## More NewsU Webinars to be offered

In November 2009, NINA members received a special discounted rate for the NewsU Webinar, "Facebook for Journalists."

Response from our members was enthusiastic -- so much so that, in the coming months, NINA plans to partner with NewsU to offer more discounted online training. Watch our Web site and Digital Ink blog for details.

NewsU is the Poynter Institute's online series of journalism training programs. It includes self-directed courses, group seminars and Webinars.

Visit NewsU's newly relaunched Web site at [www.newsu.org](http://www.newsu.org).



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# Dispatches from behind the lines

By Jim Killam

Over the past year, several of our new NIU graduates have found reporting jobs at small-town daily newspapers across the country.

Based on what they'd heard and read, I think they half-expected to find these places in ruins: dark, empty newsrooms ... tumbleweeds blowing through the pressroom ... the assorted journalism refugee hiding behind a stack of yellowed newspapers, swilling whiskey, snarling into a disconnected, rotary-dial phone, "Get me Rewrite!"

They've encountered something very different: vibrant newsrooms that still produce a printed product their communities can't imagine living without. To be sure, there's an empty desk here or there. The economy and the newspaper decline have taken a toll. But you hear a lot less talk in a small town about newspapers going away. You hear a whole lot more talk sparked by what's in the paper.

Newspapers remain the lifeblood of these communities whose entire populations would fit comfortably inside Wrigley Field, or even snugly into Huskie Stadium. A few months into their jobs, I offered my former students the chance to reflect on their career decisions and life far away from a big-city metro.

"Working for a small-town newspaper has really shown me what it means to be a community journalist," said 2008 grad John Puterbaugh, a reporter and copy editor for the Daily Chronicle in DeKalb. "I also live in the community in which I work, and it's not difficult to find that my own world is not too far detached from anyone else's."

He especially likes the fact that sources, readers and journalists are all neighbors -- much more so than in a large city or suburbia.

"I get the feeling that connections made and relationships formed in small communities are the kinds of connections you can count on for the long run," he said. "I guess, with a less fluid populace, it's just easy to grow comfortable working and living in smaller communities."

2009 grad Caitlin Mullen got a reporting job at the Sanford Herald in Sanford, N.C., a city of 29,000. Staff there has shrunk; one of the paper's three reporting positions isn't being refilled for now. So no one's exactly holding pep rallies in the newsroom.

"But, I do love my job," she said. "I enjoy talking to new people every day and building

relationships in a new place. Everyone has a story. And I like small towns. Most people here are very friendly.

"I love interacting with people, and getting to tell their stories is a privilege. As long as I can do that, I'm happy."

Giles Bruce ('09) works at the Charles City Press in the northern Iowa town of 8,000.

"My paper doesn't have another newspaper in town to compete with, nor are their bloggers aiming for our scraps," he said. "There's a radio station in town, and other papers and TV stations nearby, but a lot of their Charles City news comes from us."

People here actually get their news ... from the newspaper. Not the online version or a blog or a TV station, but the actual print, hold-in-your-hands paper. That's something I -- who still read print editions -- can appreciate.

"I also never thought a town of 8,000 people could support a five-day-a-week daily. I've lived in towns with six times the population that only had a weekly. And the folks here don't think anything of it -- a paper arriving at their house every weekday morning is just how it's always been."

John Ranallo ('09) works for the Beloit Daily News in the Wisconsin town of 35,000. This after spending last summer interning at a weekly newspaper in Wolf Point, Mont., where the pronghorn population may outnumber the people.

"I really think small town journalism is where it's at," he said. "It is great to live in a town where you see the effects of your work rather than have it get buried in a larger mass of news. It is humbling to receive calls and letters from real people who care about the area they live in. I have learned that being a reporter is a very noble job -- one that requires me to become actively engaged in everything I am doing, and I love it."

"I use to think I wanted to be a big metro reporter, and while I haven't ruled it out someday, it is great to make a difference. Sometimes I think reporters don't understand how much of a difference they can make. I never envisioned myself here, but I am glad I made it."



Jim Killam is adviser for the Northern Star, the daily student media at Northern Illinois University. He serves as NINA's communications coordinator. Contact him at [jkillam@niu.edu](mailto:jkillam@niu.edu), or 815-753-4239.

## CALENDAR

### Friday, March 19

• NINA Board meeting, 10 a.m., Northern Star, NIU.

### Friday, April 23

• NINA Spring Conference, time and place TBA.

### Friday, June 25

• NINA Board meeting, 10 a.m., Northern Star, NIU.

### Friday, Sept. 10

• NINA Board meeting, 10 a.m., Northern Star, NIU.

### Wednesday, Oct. 20

• NINA Fall Conference and Awards Banquet, NIU.

### Friday, Dec. 3

• NINA Board meeting, 10 a.m., Northern Star, NIU.

# 5 guidelines to clearer news writing

By Jim Killam

Tired of flabby sentences? Obtuse stories? Share these tips among your news staff.

## 1. Think of every word as costing you \$1.

*No:* After the announcement was made by President John Smith that he will be retiring early next year, Jones, under his board authority, created an ad hoc committee that will find representatives to sit on the actual search committee. (38 words)

*Yes:* President John Smith announced last month he will retire early next year. Jones has since created a temporary committee to choose a search committee. (24 words)

## 2. S-V-O: Subject-Verb-Object. Right-branching sentences. Don't delay meaning. Don't use a lot of commas.

*No:* Johnson, who worked as a bursar at DePaul University in Chicago prior to working at Beloit, said she missed the

university environment.

*Yes:* Johnson was a bursar at Chicago's DePaul University before her Beloit job. She missed the university environment.

## 3. Strong verbs, active voice.

*No:* The poem will be read by Smith.

*Yes:* Smith will read the poem.

## 4. Don't let bureaucrats choose your words.

*No:* The search committee will be constructed in accordance with Article 8 of the NIU constitution.

*Yes:* NIU's constitution dictates the search committee's makeup.

## 5. No more than three stats in any sentence.

*No:* Wednesday, the NIU baseball team's winless streak hit 22 as NIU (4-37-1) dropped a twin bill to Miami (21-18-1), 8-2 and 10-5, at Oxford, Ohio..

*Yes:* NIU's baseball losing streak reached 22 as the Huskies dropped a doubleheader Wednesday to Miami, 8-2 and 10-5.