

THE BIG STORY

FOURTH ESTATE 2.0 PUTS INNOVATION ABOVE THE FOLD



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POSTING IN CITIES

NON-PROFIT NEWS ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOP NEW WAYS TO TELL A STORY AND PLAY WATCHDOG, WHILE TECH GURUS NOW SHARE THE BYLINES. IS THE FUTURE OF NEWS

ALREADY HERE?



(http://i.bnet.com/blogs/smartplanet_bigstory_april2013.jpg)

(http://i.bnet.com/blogs/smartplanet_bigstory_april2013.jpg) When Travis Swicegood came across a Craigslist ad for a Web developer job at the Texas Tribune in 2010, he knew little about non-profit news organizations and even less about the Tribune. Some of his friends were working as developers in traditional newsrooms, and he knew that they worried about job security. But he was looking for a challenging project that would in some way enable him to make the world a better place. And he wondered if this job might just be his ticket to both.

Swicegood had grown up in El Paso. He was the kind of kid who was always tinkering with things, and by high school, he was running a BBS, or a bulletin board system, that allowed him to connect with friends on an archaic message board over his parents' phone line. The

summer after he graduated from high school, in 1999, he shelved the idea of going to college and becoming a professor in favor of a more lucrative alternative -- working in Web development for start-ups.

By the time he applied for the Tribune job 11 years later, non-profit news organizations had popped up across the country and were serving as a promising antidote to an industry that some would say was on life support. "The final question on the job application was: 'Why do you want to work for us?'" Swicegood said. "I wrote, 'I'm not really sure that I do.'"

Swicegood was living in Kansas at the time, and he flew to Austin for an interview at the Tribune's office, a few blocks from the Texas Capitol on Congress Avenue. It didn't take long for him to decide that this was, indeed, a place he wanted to work. "Their early financial successes and having money in the bank told me they weren't running on fumes," Swicegood said. That financial stability, coupled with the Tribune's bullish stance on technology, tipped the scale and he was sold.

Today, Swicegood, 32, heads up a five-person tech team that works in a cramped, dimly lit room of glowing Mac screens. If one were to measure Swicegood's tenure in tech time, it was eons ago that he came to fully grasp the significance of this opportunity: It allowed him to marry his development skills with his do-gooder appetite; and it made him a player in the resuscitation of the reportedly endangered news industry. But perhaps most exciting: The future of this new animal was partly his to create.

Driving off the cliff, betting on innovation

As traditional news media has downsized in the last decade, many of its stars and emerging talent -- finding themselves out of work or simply scratching an entrepreneurial itch -- have pioneered the concept of an Internet-based non-profit news organization. These independent newsrooms have given journalists a new voice and a new way to tell stories. And one of the most successful stories to emerge is that of the Texas Tribune.

Launched in November 2009, the organization is funded by individual contributions, corporate sponsorships and foundation grants. By the end of 2012, the Tribune (with a staff of 38) better than broke even, with \$4.5 million in revenue.

But during the first six months of operation, CEO and editor-in-chief Evan Smith went to sleep every night with a feeling of dread. Earlier this year, he sat in his corner office, from which he can see half of the Capitol dome, and talked about the early days. A white guitar that he doesn't play -- a gift from friends at Austin City Limits music festival -- sat in a corner behind his desk. Smith explained that as a co-founder of this venture (he left behind 18 years at Texas Monthly), he felt like both Thelma and Louise driving off the cliff.

"It felt really risky," Smith said. "There was no predicate in what we were trying to do." He described himself first as a riverboat gambler and second as a person who understands that one has a limited amount of time in his life to do good work. In other words, driving off the cliff was a no-brainer. He looks askance at those who have an

aversion to risk in journalism. “You let your chips fall,” he said, “on things that have a good chance of working out and are entrepreneurial.”

Emily Ramshaw -- one of the founding members of the Tribune and the daughter of two journalists -- came from the Dallas Morning News, where she had witnessed three rounds of layoffs. “Evan called and said, ‘Will you help me?’ It felt risky, but as a relatively young person, it felt more risky to stay in the establishment media. I felt a strong drive to see if there was a way to do this where people weren’t losing their jobs.”

Non-profit and independent news organizations are hardly new -- NPR and Mother Jones have both been around since the 1970s. But, as so many other industries have found, the advent of the Internet caused nothing short of a sea change in the news business. Colossal amounts of information and data were now accessible (which meant a whole new world of content); and free or inexpensive Web development programs decreased the industry’s barriers to entry (which meant a whole new world of media outlets). In short order, non-profit news organizations matured from new kid on the block to serious player.

Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Pew Research Project for Excellence in Journalism, said these non-profit news organizations play a critical role today. If traditional newsrooms are giant icebergs, he said, non-profits are smaller ice floes that can be an important part of the media ecosystem.

No matter their structure, all are trying to fill the void left by

traditional media outlets, which in many cases are still struggling with how to present -- and pay for -- online content. Funding for labor-intensive investigative reporting is often seen as a luxury in legacy newsrooms, while the non-profit news teams view it as their lifeblood. And they allocate the dollars to prove it. According to Manhattan-based ProPublica, founded in 2007 by former Wall Street Journal managing editor Paul Steiger, they spend more than 85 cents out of every dollar on news -- the opposite of the breakdown at traditional print news organizations. And at the Tribune, the *modus operandi* would make many journalists green with envy: Pay reporters like professionals, with bonuses and raises.

But what really sets these organizations apart are the tools that Web developers now use to help reporters gather and share these daunting amounts of public information in innovative ways. This reliance on technology is both thrilling and terrifying -- depending on whether you are the eager Web developer or the not-so-tech-savvy veteran newsroom journalist.

“We’re a newsroom of 38 people,” said Richard Tofel, president of ProPublica, “and we’re trying to compete in a league with organizations that are much bigger. Our technology is what makes that possible. It enables us to play above our weight.”

According to Pew, at least 25 non-profit news organizations have shut down in the last four or five years. Among those left standing, many are mom-and-pop operations that are barely eking it out. But a handful are in a different league. They have shown that sustainability

is possible, and the ingredients are simple: exceptional content and innovation.

“It’s so much fun to tell stories this way, and so many of our clicks come for our data,” Ramshaw said, noting that Web developers share bylines with reporters. But she said it’s a constant challenge to keep up with the technology that enables these new storytelling channels and to continue to be the “shiny new object” that catches funders’ eyes. “You are only as innovative as the last cool thing you did,” she said. “In this digital space, I never want to stop innovating.”

Tech solutions

At the end of the day, programming is about solving problems -- and that’s no different in newsrooms. Whether it’s taking millions of records in a state database and putting them into a digestible format, or connecting two sets of records in a novel way, Swicegood and his peers are pioneering new ways to look at information.

“It’s a really unique opportunity,” Swicegood said. “I can go sit in on ideas meetings, and the editorial staff is framing a story in a way they know is possible. I can drive that conversation with a tech background and give them ideas of things they didn’t even know we could do. We can launch something overnight at 9,000 new pages of information. If a traditional newspaper wanted to do that ... what, are they going to print a book?”

The Tribune, which is known for its strong coverage of Texas politics and policy, has become proficient at taking information that’s either

massive or confusing (or both) and distilling it down to a format more suitable for public consumption. The data is accompanied by related news stories that give context to the numbers.

Lawmaker Explorer, for example, is an interactive tool that launched earlier this year, allowing the public to learn the degree to which 180 state legislators' personal interests (i.e. stock holdings, property listings) conflict with public interest when passing bills and shaping policy. Its data came from old-fashioned reporting, and the tech team figured out how to present the information. You can use a search box, click on head shots, sort by party, office or occupation.

Public Schools Explorer is a comprehensive database of the 8,500 public schools in the state of Texas. There are searchable applications for 160,000 state inmates; salaries of 665,000 public employees; and 6.5 million contributions to candidates and political action committees.

ProPublica is also leading the way in nonprofit news media applications, graphics, databases and mapping. One of its most popular, with more than 4 million page views: the Dollars for Docs survey, which is a database of more than \$2 billion in payments from drug companies to health care providers. It was developed in an effort to learn more about the relationship between drug companies, medical professionals and the effect on patient care.

The project has prompted local articles by more than 100 other news organizations nationwide, substantially increasing the impact. And by soliciting information from the public on its site (“How do you feel about your doctor receiving payments from drug companies?”)

ProPublica is promoting the idea of the citizen journalist -- one who is an active participant in the news and understands his role in holding companies and government accountable.

“The folks on the leading edge are looking at the news application space and looking beyond the traditional investigative, long-form story,” said Adam Schweigert, technology director at the Investigative News Network (INN), which provides support and training in technology (and other areas) for nearly 100 non-profit news organizations. “They’re looking at maps and visualization and figuring out what can help people understand these issues.”

In tech and news, leveraging the community

In the business of disclosure, knowledge-sharing trumps all, and journalists perhaps understand that better than anyone. The culture of transparency at these non-profit outlets is evident in everything from their published lists of donors to Web-development ideas, which are commonly shared between organizations.

“There’s more of an ethos around open-source and sharing so organizations can benefit from work that’s already been done,” Schweigert said. “There’s less reinvention of the wheel at every new organization, so that allows them to get started faster and not spend a lot of money.” At INN, he sets up calls with members during which he discusses and demonstrates emerging Web tools, and the culture is such that even competing organizations are open to sharing.

“One of the things that drew me to Austin was a really active and

vibrant tech community,” Swicegood said. “There are meet-ups and presentations around new technology.” For instance, he helped organize an Austin meet-up solely dedicated to Python, a Web programming language. To keep up with the latest tools, he reads blogs, attends conferences, learns from other developers who are working through problems, and shares solutions he’s figured out at the Tribune. He’s learned that being a generalist is key.

“Understanding programming is important, but willingness to learn quickly is critical,” he said. “The day of the specialist is over. If you’re just amazing at Excel or WordPress, and that’s all you do, your days are limited.”

Even fundraising has become high-tech. “Most of our members were started with foundation money, and they want to diversify that as quickly as they can,” Schweigert said, “so technology makes a lot of that possible.” He said crowdfunding tools like Kickstarter are leading the way, supplementing ads and foundation money. One of the most impressive examples is the Kickstarter campaign for an independent radio show and podcast about design called 99% Invisible, which set a goal of raising \$42,000 to fund its next season and has now raised more than \$170,000.

While much of the Tribune is cutting-edge, its regular community events -- which are a critical part of the organization’s success -- are decidedly low-tech. There are breakfast meetings with new state representatives, lunches to learn about the current legislative session and discussions covering topics from women’s issues to drought. The

events are part town hall meeting, part education series, part meet-up, and they leave no doubt that the public -- students, policy wonks, soccer moms -- is passionate about government and policy.

Smith said no matter which way citizens lean politically, “We all agree that a better Texas is a public good. And better educated Texans benefit the state.”

Ramshaw said she’s still astounded by the success of their events, some of which are free and some of which are revenue-generators. “I knew we’d knock it out of the park with journalism, and I knew we could hire geeky people for data,” she said. “I never knew people would want to come together and go to these events at 7:30 in the friggin’ morning.”

Although success is measured differently for each organization, community engagement is certainly a priority. “Grant-makers don’t seek to get something back in the normal way an investor does, but we do look for an impact,” said Vincent Stehle, executive director of Philadelphia-based Media Impact Funders, which is developing a database of media grant-making. To be sure, it is hard to measure the impact of reminding citizens that they, too, can be watchdogs. But engaging the public to a degree that leads to reform is clearly a step in the right direction.

“Maintaining the health of our democracy is an important function for philanthropy,” Stehle said, “and the price of creating and maintaining these news organizations is a relative bargain against the cost of corruption.”

Schweigert said down the road, he expects to see more community involvement through these news organizations. He also sees a trend of simplification in how news is presented: cleaner layouts and less junk, like one might see in small screen/mobile design.

At the Tribune, one-quarter of whose users are on smart phones or tablets, making the site mobile-friendly is a priority. Swicegood's team recently launched what is called a responsive redesign -- an ongoing project that enables the Web site to respond to its environment no matter the device (i.e. easier scrolling and navigation on a smart phone), rather than, for instance, trying to jam a large-monitor Web page onto a tiny screen. Swicegood said the process is straightforward for text, audio and visual components, but making this change for data journalism -- which can be particularly useful on a handheld device, say, at a political event -- is challenging.

Swicegood is also looking into technologies that allow users to, for instance, follow the money in politics. He explains a scenario in which one might be able to select a politician, find out how he is connected to certain types of bills, learn he has many connections in a particular industry, discover that he heads a committee, see who attends committee hearings, find out that one lobbyist is a regular attendee, and learn that the lobbyist has contributed to the politician's political action committee, which happened to give the politician a lot of money for his re-election campaign. "Being able to create those connections could be interesting," Swicegood said. "It's hard to really understand networks until you can visualize them."

As the developers figure out the next shiny new thing, academics and researchers try to determine the future of these organizations. Pew is working on a major report about the economic health of the non-profit news model, which will be available this spring. A key question has to do with survival after an organization burns through its founding grants. “Once we take the training wheels off,” Jurkowitz said, “can we bike down the street?”

But in Austin, there is little time for such questions. The Tribune staff seems to be biking full steam ahead. This summer, the staff will move from their 1,500 square-foot office to a 7,500 square-foot space upstairs, with a five-year lease. Instead of worrying at night, Smith now goes to sleep thinking about what he has yet to do. And never does he agonize about making payroll.

“The office is filled with smart, creative people who love what they do and aren’t afraid of losing their jobs every day,” Ramshaw said. “It’s thrilling to me that we’re hiring people who don’t know any different -- and who are bringing such optimism to the industry.”

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