

Tim Nelson, the new-style reporter

The job of a reporter is not what it used to be. Goff & Howard spoke with *Pioneer Press* reporter Tim Nelson, the epitome of an information-age journalist, about how his job has changed and what constitutes news today.



Tim Nelson has worked with the Pioneer Press for 15 years. He covers St. Paul City Hall, St. Paul Police Department, recreation, and general assignment topics.

What is a typical day for you?

I start my day cruising through local blogs and news sites about 6 a.m., then come to work several hours later carrying a ridiculous amount of gear, including a laptop, a Marantz digital recorder, and several digital cameras.

My goal is to put something in the paper every shift that I work and fill in the edges with blog postings and other digital content. It might just be another photo added to my collection on Flickr (featuring St. Paul's most extensive collection of pictures of politicians in parades), or a quick interview that I can put in a podcast later. I talk briefly with my editor about what to expect from me, and then try to put out as much as I possibly can as quickly as I can do it.

So far, I've put up about 700 blog postings, ranging from the most mundane, like home price trends, to some truly good gossip – like the day in 2005 that Bill Finney showed up over the lunch hour and picked up the paperwork to file to run for mayor, despite being chair of the Chris Coleman campaign. It made for some great drama as the 4:30 p.m. deadline approached, something I couldn't have done in the paper.

The digital content serves a number of purposes, besides bringing traffic to our site. It serves as a very focused and popular additional product that shows that the paper is keenly interested in the city, and it helps draw in a lot of news and tips that wouldn't otherwise come in. People have actually started to pitch items "for the blog," hoping that it will either break it into some kind of public attention or, alternately, sufficiently

slake our interest to keep it out of the paper. It isn't always successful – blog items have run intact in the *Pioneer Press* – but it means that we can put out more product than ever before at the same cost.

How is the life of a reporter different today than it was 10 years ago?

It's not even the same job any more. When the 35W bridge collapsed, I went immediately to the scene, and there were nothing but gawkers around. The interest in digital content, though, kept me going, searching and searching, until I finally found two actual bridge survivors that had been treated for minor injuries at the University of Minnesota Medical Center. I recorded interviews with them and put them up on our Web site and had National Public Radio and the *New York Times* calling to ask for the audio the next morning.

And where I used to be looking only for sources and documents, I'm looking now for digital content. It can be interviews that I record myself, or existing video that someone else has shot. More and more we are collectors of every kind of information we can lay our hands on and less and less simply writers for a newspaper.

How do you decide whether a news item goes into the paper or a blog?

My parents live in Woodbury and subscribe to the paper. Whenever I am writing something for the paper, I try to think of what my mom would be interested in. It's not like she doesn't care about anything but her neighborhood – she's fairly

conversant in St. Paul's civic life – but I know, too, when her eyes start to roll, metaphorically speaking. If it's something that I will want to refer to later, or some kind of even remotely interesting detail nonetheless, I put it on the blog.

There are other things, too, that simply don't belong in the paper. In the days following the last two elections, I have run a ranked list of precinct-by-precinct turnout. It's mind-numbing, but if you are really a junkie, knowing that Lee Helgen's home precinct had the highest turnout in the city for the city council primary tells you something about his campaign – something that most people aren't going to pick through a list of 60 precincts to sort out.

Has the Internet and “City Hall Scoop” changed the way people work with you?

It's a huge change for me. The fluidity of the Scoop has really released us to experiment. We can be much more speculative, much more interpretive on the Scoop because we can be much more responsive. If something is wrong or incomplete, we get quick feedback from readers and can make corrections or additions very quickly. We put things up that invite comment and input, knowing that readers seeing it on their computer screens are much more apt to contact us than they are in the paper.

How has the Internet impacted how you try to cover issues and events?

A newspaper story is still a newspaper story, and filling the pages of the *Pioneer Press* remains the staff's first priority. But, we look at the financial pages and read the trades too. We see where the market is going, and realize that we need to drive traffic onto our Web site as well. For us, that typically means fresh information. Breaking news drives traffic, so we tend to put what we know up on the site as quickly as we can get it in acceptable form.

Last session's bar tax proposal is a prime example. It's something I was alerted to by a Scoop reader who had been at the Capitol at 2 a.m. I confirmed it and Bill Salisbury and I

wrote about it as quickly as we could get the facts nailed down. We put it up on the Web, and within minutes, we could see people walking around the Capitol with printouts of the story. It sparked enough reaction that the liquor tax was subsequently pulled from the larger bill into which it had been inserted. The issue went from non-existent to the talk of the town and back to non-existent in less time than it takes us to put out two papers.

You take photos, record audio, post to a blog, and still have to write articles – which is most important and how do you balance all of this?

About 20% of my output now goes strictly to the Web, a proportion that the paper would not have tolerated five years ago. I have no idea if that matches the company's revenue breakdown or not, but my managers seem to tolerate that balance at this point.

I think, as the paper of record in the East Metro, just putting things in print is still an important validation for a lot of civic happenings. A developer recently pulled from his portfolio a photocopy of a story I did on the riverfront, telling me it was what had got him interested in a St. Paul project in the first place. The relative permanence of paper and ink, I think, still has a value beyond “breaking” news.

Do reporters today have more responsibilities as a result of the Internet and media ownership consolidation?

We are firmly impaled on the dual edges of the internet sword. I came to a newsroom where you would see crowds of people sitting around their desks waiting for the phone to ring at 4 p.m., praying for that last bit of information, that last interview. Now, what I need flashes into my inbox. I get documents in 10 seconds that would have taken me days to track down. I can background a person or a company in a fraction of what it used to take me. It means that we are getting a lot more done with a lot fewer people than we were 10 years ago.

The downside: we sell that work for a lot less than we used to. There are fewer ads and circulation in newspapers across the country has dropped by nearly 1/6 since I got my first byline.

What do you think news consumers can expect in the next five years?

Web 2.0 is radically transforming the information landscape. The level of digital raw material has grown to the point where the secondary market of aggregators and interpreters has matured and become a growing concern. That secondary market has not been tested by the years of competition, legal challenges and social disturbance to which “main stream media” has acclimated. I don’t think these are bad things. The old saw that whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger has kept us going through radio, television and many other changes. But I think we have yet to see how these forces play out online.