

Final report
Task force for content evaluation

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The Spokesman-Review

Christopher Anderson
Bert Caldwell
Paula Davenport
Taryn Hecker
Jim Kershner
Thuy-Dzuong Nguyen
Tracy Poindexter
John Stucke
Ralph Walter

Nine people from the newsroom were given the mandate to, in essence, come up with a plan for our news organization's content – starting from zero. What follows is a digest of many of the ideas that arose from many hours of meeting, brainstorming, arguing and analyzing. Not everyone agreed with every idea, yet we have noted when we reached a consensus. In all other cases, assume that a particular idea was received with various degrees of enthusiasm from some and skepticism from others.

We'll start with the basics:

1 - CRUCIAL CONTENT AREAS

We were given the mission of building our content from the ground up. This means we must begin with the most non-radical of content areas, the ones we absolutely must cover if we are to continue to be vital to the lives of our audience. These are also the areas that serve the S-R's own statement of values. We have them listed roughly in order of importance:

» HARD NEWS

Local government – Covering local government is crucial to our duty as a watchdog, and crucial if we want to remain relevant for readers. The consensus in the group is that we have already slipped in this area; it must return as a priority.

- Coverage: At a minimum, we should attend all of our major city and county meetings – Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. In Spokane, that means a designated city government reporter and a designated county government reporter. This does not mean churning out rote “process” stories every week, but we should at least keep readers informed of what their government is up to at all times. Routine meetings also result in non-routine story ideas. A staffer who has covered both the city and county beats said there is “enough important and interesting news on both beats to be deserving of separate beat reporters.” In a time of downsizing this may be impossible, yet these are our most crucial beats.
- Other cities: One staffer noted that we do an even more hit-and-miss job of covering the *other* cities in our community. Small communities such as Spirit Lake and Rathdrum get more coverage than Coeur d'Alene.
- The most recent Belden survey indicates a high audience interest for basic city news. If we can't convince our audience that we are providing it, we are leaving unfulfilled a basic demand of our audience. Someone else will step in and provide it.

- We also have ideas for a deeper web presence for this kind of reporting, covered below in the section “Presentation Across Multiple Platforms.”

Politics – We must also keep a close eye on our state and federal representatives, for the same reasons. The consensus of the group is that we have already slipped in this area as well. We have no official political reporter – in an election year, no less. We must take full advantage of the experience and expertise we already have on staff in these areas. Jim Camden is one of the most respected political reporters in the state – unleash him to do what he does best.

We must also at least maintain our already excellent Olympia and Boise coverage. Although a Boise reporter might seem like a luxury for our largely Washington audience, we understand that nobody else in North Idaho is providing this coverage.

International and national news – There’s a division in our group about how much emphasis this should have.

- Some believe that our future is in strictly local news, news that people can’t get anywhere else.
- Others believe that going all local will irritate our readers, who continue to value national and international news, according to Belden, as well as give us an image of being provincial and small-town.
- We also believe that we must constantly be on the lookout for short “brights” and the “news of the weird” type of wire content to counteract the “dull and boring” label.
- A more detailed discussion can be found in the section titled “The Local Question.”

Investigative reporting – We have been known for being strong in this area for decades; it’s part of our mission and our brand. The consensus is it must be maintained.

Police and crime – There was a consensus that this is an area which can be de-emphasized, especially when it comes to devoting resources to chasing fender-benders, and other “low-threshold events” which we have increasingly done in the name of breaking news. “We’ve got a morning mojo who covers sometimes inconsequential news simply to get us online,” one staffer wrote to us.

- Threshold: A three-fatality crash is a big local story; the routine accident is not. The Belden survey indicates that police and crime news is important to our audience, but not as important as basic city and neighborhood news.
- Abuse stories: We also reached consensus that we have had an over-emphasis on sex abuse and sex offender stories. This should be brought back into balance.
- Bigger picture: We should also make sure we spin our crime stories into trend stories, keeping public safety in mind.

Social services – A key area of content that serves our values statement and gives

voice to the voiceless. We feel it is essential. On a related note, most of us felt that “Our Kids Our Business,” while it provided good content, has run its course after two years. A typical comment: “We have said what we have to say here.”

Environment and natural resources – Because of the nature of our region, we feel that this is a crucial subject area. We have gone from having four or five reporters working (at least in part) on this beat to one. Belden indicates a high interest in this kind of news – above even education and business.

We also believe that agriculture should be covered more consistently, possibly as part of this beat, since it is one of our region’s most important industries.

Education – Our audience demands that we stay on top of this crucial content area. It should be broadened to include private schools. It speaks directly to our S-R values statement regarding youth.

Higher education – This is also a key content area, since we have a number of campuses in our region. It also speaks to our values statement. We might want to look into taking advantage of local college journalism programs and using some of their content in an “On Campus” package.

Health Care – It does not rate highly in Belden, but we feel this is a subject that we ignore at our peril, since it is one of our biggest industries – if not the biggest.

Military – We have a huge military base and vet’s hospital, and we believe military issues will be even more important in the upcoming years. We also have a substantial military retiree population.

» COMBINING BEATS

The obvious question must be asked: How do we keep all of these beats in a time of downsizing? One realistic answer: Give many reporters two beats, a main beat and a secondary beat.

The disadvantage is obvious: Less time devoted to each beat. Yet the idea comes with built-in efficiencies. When reporters hit a dry spell in one beat, they can turn to the other beat. Even with two beats, a reporter should be able to stay on top of most developments in any given beat, and will still feel a sense of responsibility and accountability.

We spent a great deal of time struggling with the question of whether to construct an actual beat structure. However, we finally decided it would be difficult to do so in a meaningful way because of our present state of flux; we simply don’t know how many bodies will be available to fill these beats.

We do believe that a two-beat structure will allow far more flexibility and allow us

to cover more subjects. Some beats noted above – such as local government – should remain full-time beats. But many of the above can be combined.

» AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

We also brainstormed, along with our other newsroom colleagues, about some non-traditional beats, including:

- **American Cultural beat** – Let a good writer loose with the goal of simply explaining this strange world we live in. It might be a story about being inside the gaming culture one day; about the lure of motorcycle rallies the next; about how teenage boys keep their pants from falling down the next. (This could be a news or features beat and should not to be confused with the “cultures” beat as we have known it in the past).
- **A regular “This Is Your Life” beat** – Devote resources to regular profiles telling people’s life stories *before* it’s too late. Too often, we don’t read these stories until they are in the obituaries. (Alternatively, have a regular showcase for a featured obit).
- **A rotating “seasonal” beat** – A beat that covers lake culture in the summer, ski culture in the winter, for instance.
- **A late-night or overnight beat** – A beat dedicated to the life of our community that does not take place from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Among its advantages: It could be a pipeline of fresh content for the web for all of those users who log on at 8 a.m. It must be a non-traditional beat cutting across all subjects, not just strictly cops. (One disadvantage brought up by one person: A lot of dead time when nothing is going on and a reporter can’t even contact people).
- **Animal beat** – A reporter devoted to finding pet and animal stories. It sounds a bit fluffy on first impression, but it could also be expanded to stories about everything from bird migration to moose populations to parakeets that play basketball. This was suggested by Amy Cannata, and feelings within the committee were decidedly mixed. Yet it could certainly be a crowd-pleaser, and in the right hands it could be a pipeline of stories people would devour.

» COMMENTARY, SPORTS, FEATURES AND BUSINESS

Columns and commentary – It was the group’s general consensus that commentary and analysis should have an even higher priority. People can get information in a lot of places, yet what they need more than ever is someone to analyze it, explain what it all means and sometimes make fun of it. The latest Belden survey noted that we had a lot of columnists with strong followings and recommended that we promote them even more. Instead we went the opposite direction and dropped a number of columnists.

One particular need: A hard-news oriented Metro columnist. Columns don’t particularly fit the standard definition of “local” news, yet they are in fact intensely local.

They give our product a personality. Many of us also would love to see a broader spectrum of gender, age and race in our columnists throughout the rest of the paper.

Sports – A consensus emerged that sports should increasingly consolidate its coverage to the three main local franchises that we “own”: WSU football and basketball, Gonzaga basketball and prep sports. We can provide the in-depth coverage that TV can’t and nobody else does. When spread across an in-depth web platform (as well as print) this can bring us a regional or even national audience for this coverage.

- “We simply can’t put enough people on the Cougs and Zags,” said one staffer, and we agree wholeheartedly. We believe it’s important to send our main sports columnist on the road with the teams.
- A step below would be the Chiefs, Shock, Indians, EWU and Idaho. Some content would have to give. One suggested that women’s sports be de-emphasized, although this was not a consensus by any means.
- We also strongly believe that local sports commentary and analysis should be emphasized. In addition, the Outdoors section is a vital part of the package, and intensely local.

Features/Arts and Entertainment – “Kill 7 and buy the Inlander,” one member said. Most of us thought this was a little extreme, yet a consensus emerged that the 7 section needs to be revamped and reshaped.

There was some support for the idea of turning 7 back into a true arts-and-entertainment magazine, containing all of the paper’s A&E coverage, including the symphony and theater previews now used on the Today cover on Thursdays. This would have the virtue of making the Friday magazine the one-stop place for all entertainment coverage – although it would mean losing a number of local centerpieces from the Today cover.

Most of the group supported the more modest 7 proposals which are already in the works. Ken Paulman filled us in on these ideas, which include the following:

- Moving the cover story and movie coverage to the front;
- Moving the local music coverage farther back;
- Adding regular space inside titled On Stage and Visual Arts to give a bigger presence to “high culture” as opposed to strictly pop culture.

The group embraces these ideas. Another staffer, involved in that coverage, told us, “Ultimately 7’s content should be event-driven with broad appeal.”

As for features, we felt that it could benefit from some of the stories that would be generated if we were to incorporate some of the new beats listed above, namely animals, American culture and “This Is Your Life.”

It is worth noting that the Today and Food sections rate highly in the Belden readership survey. Also, “cultural events” rate surprisingly high on our audience’s “interest” list. We can’t afford to cut back on this coverage much more than we already have.

Business – We believe that business news is good local news and we have a good mix presently. We would put more emphasis on consumer affairs and less on tech. We like the idea that business news is often treated as regular news and brought up front. We believe our watchdog role should extend to business as well as government. We liked the Gang of Eight’s suggestion that we partner with the Journal of Business for business news and use our company’s combined resources more efficiently.

We should also note that our online ad team says that business content is in especially strong demand from web advertisers.

» SELECTED COMMENTS FROM STAFF

We asked people throughout the newsroom – and on other floors as well – to e-mail us their thoughts on content. Here’s a selection of what they said:

- “We cannot solve the business woes of the newspaper industry and I’m tired of being asked to do that. We need to commit good journalism every day. That’s why we’re here.”
- “I would like a Kid’s Page every week with things to attract younger readers, with mazes, puzzles, fun facts, science projects, etc.”
- “The people I’ve talked to in the last year are angry about the gutting of the CDA office, miffed about getting less regional coverage on the Northwest pages and wondering what happened to our investigative reporting. Only a few of them ever go to our web site.”
- “We should focus on what we do best and put a renewed emphasis on quality. We should be Spokane and Kootenai counties sources for news with depth and for local government.”
- “Take advantage of the short items in the paper ... Couldn’t we have more fun in those spots in the newspaper? Are there some alternative forms that might work in the briefs? By the numbers? Top Five lists? A reader tip of the day?”
- “Look at where people in our community work: government. That means the A.F. base, local government offices and schools. Yet we don’t cover those as employers much at all.”
- “We don’t cover consumer issues in any kind of planned way, and those are the things that touch a lot of readers.”
- “One of our main challenges is the Dull and Boring label. We need to work harder than we do now at finding and delivering unusual, eye-catching stories. During the summer, our education reporters should be cut loose with just one goal: Go outside the newspaper office, roam about and dig up good stories.”
- “People say two things: There’s not enough time to read the paper, and they also say there’s not enough news in the paper. The reason for this is, we’ve increased the story count; what we’ve lost is the gravitas quotient. What we need to do is have a lot of briefs, but in every section we must have at least one in-depth story that

- people can linger over.”
- “I think we could solve a lot of these problems if we decided what we want to be. Do we want to take a more controversial, consumerist approach top covering the community “ Do we want to contain coverage of all the news of the day? Do we want to emphasize watchdog reporting? If we decide what our goal is, we can make decisions that further us toward that goal.”

2 - PRESENTATION ACROSS MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

Our mandate was not to determine how to present our content. However, presentation and platform inevitably have an effect on content. Consequently we spent a significant amount of time on the following questions: Which content is best suited to which platform? And how can we maximize our efficiency, with fewer resources, in feeding these platforms?

Leverage our content as much as possible across all platforms: A consensus emerged that the only reasonable way to feed all of our platforms is to use our content across every platform, as much as possible.

“Efficiency dictates you use the content as many ways as you can,” said one member. In one example, this would mean that a story for print be re-packaged for the web in a way that suits the unique demands of the web (and radio, too, although radio is mostly beyond our mandate).

Have a dedicated Web re-write person: One member suggested that, in some cases, this will mean boiling stories down to two or three main bullet points for the Web. Why? Because research shows that the average visitor spends only three minutes on our web site, suggesting that they are in a hurry to pick up information fast.

To facilitate that repackaging, there was broad agreement that a re-write person be dedicated for the Web, someone to digest content into Web-friendly form. Web readers who want the rest of the story can follow a link to see the whole story. (A minority opinion suggested that the reporters themselves would be the best people to digest their own stories.)

From the opposite direction, we recognize that we will be creating more and more content specifically for the Web. The same efficiencies apply – that content should be re-packaged and used in the print edition, too. For instance here’s one way this could work:

Special websites devoted to subjects that we can own in-depth – One S-R person suggested that we create, for instance, a Spokane City government website within our main website. The city government reporter’s main job would be to fill that website with information, stories, analysis, accounts of meetings, etc. That information would not be restricted to that site, by any means. It would be picked up and repackaged regularly for use in the print edition. That way both platforms are fed, neither our print subscribers nor

our web users are neglected, and our reporter's insights and coverage is shared as widely as possible over the community.

"We don't cheat any platform," said one member.

Other possible subjects for in-depth web locations: The WSU Cougars, county government, North Idaho local governments, regional politics, regional arts and entertainment, Boise coverage, Olympia coverage.

Customized content – Acknowledging that we are not fully aware of the capabilities and functionality of our new Web technology, we wonder about the prospect of developing front pages tailored to a certain advertising demographic – For example a front page that targets twenty-and thirty-something women. Featured stories, blogs, video, etc.. might include parenting, health and fitness and fashion, while still containing today's headlines. It would definitely help target advertising.

We also support the development of specific topic pages under S-R.com, such as for Washington State athletics, county government, North Idaho local government, regional politics, regional arts and entertainment, all the way to smaller secondary beats such as EWU athletics.

Well-chosen blogs – There was a consensus in our group that several of our blogs are important web content and key to driving users to our site. However, we believe that we should consolidate and cluster more of them (as we did with SportsLink) so that more of them actually achieve that level. Some felt that some less-popular blogs are "simply time-suckers" for those who are doing them, without much tangible benefit and/or readership. Some disagreed, pointing out that most of our journalists are posting content that they write anyway, as digital drafts of stories.

When thinking of what kinds of blogs we want, we should think of a successful blog as a mini-newspaper, on the lines of Huckleberries Online.

There was a consensus that we must still develop a lively Spokane equivalent of Huckleberries. Someone suggested that Gary Crooks, with his Smart Bombs commentary, might have the right kind of attitude to do this. The key to a successful blog is clearly getting "outside" commentators to weigh in consistently. We just start the conversation. Our users become our content.

Newsroom blogs: There was also a general consensus that we have too many blogs about "us," i.e., the newspaper itself. One other reality check: When we talked to the people who sell and market our web content, they said that even our most wildly successful blogs are still not in significant demand from advertisers. Local news content, as traditional as it, is far more in demand, even on the web.

Move aggressively into providing mobile content – More and more people will get their information via their cell phones and Palm Pilots and we need to make sure that we are providing that content. Our content can be digested, as suggested above for the web, for this purpose. Ryan Pitts met with the group and explained that this will be far easier to do with the new web re-design.

Start thinking of the print newspaper as the “cream” of our organization –

As the web increasingly becomes the place where people go to read digests and check headlines quickly, many of us felt that print’s future might be as the “class act,” for lack of a better phrase, of our operation. The print edition should become the medium for our longer investigative pieces, analysis, commentary and other kinds of content that show off our local expertise. (One danger: making the “dull and boring” reputation even worse).

There was even some support for reserving some kinds of content strictly for print, or at least print-first. “Putting Clark’s column on the web the day before would be a killer for the next day’s paper,” said one member.

What we have to offer is our long-standing brand and we need to make the most of that – Make it very obvious that all of the products we offer – the main print paper, the Voices, 7, the website, radio – are part of our brand and tradition and legacy that we have built up over 125 years as the region’s premier newsgathering operation. There was general consensus on that point. One example of how to do that better: Design the Voices to look more like the main paper. Why give the impression that it is something separate? It’s all content from the Spokesman-Review, the biggest news operation in the region.

Branding should go both ways. Instead of just labeling stories in print as web-first, maybe we should have some stories on the website that advertise the fact that they were print-first.

Combining the A and B sections into one news-laden whole – There was support for one member’s suggestion that the A and B sections be combined into one big news section containing all of the absolute best stories of the day – local, regional or wire. This would have the virtue of giving editors the flexibility to use only the best stories, with the proper priority, without having to use a lesser story just because it comes in a centerpiece package. It should also include a digest, a “morning briefing” with lots of small items, including digests of stories that are elsewhere in the paper.

Even if combining the sections is impractical, the principal is worth considering. Here’s how one outside staffer put it: “Our local content is all over the map – some days we have enough material to make reasoned choices that give us a good mix on A1 and B1; other days it’s a struggle to come up with the six or seven local stories demanded of us each day. On those days, we might end up with something that another day wouldn’t even make B1 as a candidate for A1 simply because there are few other options.”

More color inside -- Several members raised the question, “Why can’t we have more color on the inside pages?” This would be good from both a presentation and an advertising standpoint.

Use stand-alone art when warranted – A great photo is something readers love. It’s quick to digest and full of information (especially with a good outline). Why not use

stand-alone art more often, as opposed to forcing a centerpiece package?

A Virtual Dorothy Dean – Some staffers came up with a wild idea; a web presence that includes a compilation of Dorothy Dean recipes from decades past, as well as a (lighthearted) chat area where readers could ask Dorothy Dean questions – manned by our present food editor of course. There was even talk of having a Dorothy Dean avatar talk back to users, although this may be slightly beyond our technological capabilities.

The web / print question – The issue of the relative importance of print vs. web is largely beyond the scope of a committee discussing content. However, many of our members felt strongly that the last thing we can afford to do, as an organization, is to take away more and more print content and give our print subscribers more excuses to leave. We spoke to people in the advertising and business arms of the company and received a strong message – the vast majority of our revenue comes from print and we need to keep as many print subscribers as possible. We have already lost thousands of subscribers as a result of taking away content.

One member said, “In the battle between people who see our web site for three minutes [which is about the average], versus the people who spend 35 minutes a day with the newspaper – that’s a no-brainer.”

3 - THE LOCAL QUESTION

We felt the need to weigh in on one question that all newspapers are presently struggling with: Should we accept that local is our strength and go all-local?

There was only minority support in the group for the idea of abandoning all national and international news and going strictly local. The argument in favor is, essentially, that people get their national and international news elsewhere, long before we can deliver it. It is also of relatively tiny importance online. However, the arguments against are more compelling: Many readers still expect us to bring them the most important stories of the day -- local, national and international. They get the paper to stay well-informed, and that includes stories about Pakistan and the presidential campaign as well as about Spokane. There is also a basic question of image: Going strictly local would make us look provincial, more like a small-town weekly.

One member summed up the group’s attitude: Local should be our theme, not our mandate.

That said, local is our bread-and-butter. We know it in our guts and the Belden survey confirms it over and over again. Here are some of the group’s thoughts on how to refine our local focus:

- Recognize that our columnists provide crucial local content, distinctly our own.
- The Voices have been a wild success, and they provide more than just local fluff. One reason to re-design the Voices to look more like the rest of the paper, as

suggested above, is to re-emphasize that they are part and parcel of our local coverage.

- We must constantly be alert to the possibility of localizing national and international stories. We do this now – we can do it better.
- Sports has mastered the art of finding a local angle in bigger national issues. The rest of the organization can learn from them.
- We must be careful about how we use untrained correspondents in the Voices and other sections. They are sometimes unfamiliar with journalistic practices and ethics, but in the eyes of the public, they represent us. We should be wary of using them for hard news or complicated issues.

4 - NEWSROOM CULTURE

Newsroom culture is not exactly our mandate, but in talking with our colleagues and amongst ourselves, it soon became clear that our culture affects what we cover and how we cover it. One staffer said, “At every level of our newsroom we have cultural conflict that keeps us from producing good content.”

So we will end with various observations about our newsroom culture and how we can become more efficient.

Content is feet on the street – The general consensus was that the best way to get more and better content is to free up more people to get out in the community. Some believe that we spend far too much time having meetings about content instead of actually producing it. Some believe that we are too top-heavy in management and that we’d be better off with, pardon the Native American stereotypes, fewer chiefs and more Indians. (This perspective comes, of course, from the Indians).

Recognize that the Voices are journalistically equal – We need to lose the perception that the Voices are second-rate or that they are places for people to be “banished.” The Voices are crucial parts of our operations, produced by pros.

Have one editor to keep an eye on all local coverage – We embrace the Gang of Eight’s concept that one editor should keep an eye over all of our coverage, including Voices, which will reduce redundancy and keep our overall coverage balanced.

We have become far too insular and self-important – We are NOT the story. We spend too much time, too much energy and sometimes even too much newsprint and blog space, on inside baseball. Let’s redirect all of that energy to looking outward, to the community we cover. And is it really necessary to webcast our newsroom meetings? Few people care and it makes people reluctant to speak their minds.

We should all strive to be as versatile as possible – For reporters, this means

taking pride in the ability to step in and write any kind of story, even those not on their beat or even in their section. It means learning new ways of telling stories, new technologies and new platforms. Being a jack-of-all-trades is a badge of honor. By the way, some of our best stories recently have been written by editors who were willing to step in and use their writing talents.

We must be more willing to collaborate with the company's other resources – That might mean partnering with the Journal of Business on business coverage, or with KHQ on video content. We may end up with more content, produced more efficiently. After all, we're all under the same umbrella.

Stop the turf wars -- Reporters need to share good stories and not jealously guard them. Editors need to share good content with other sections and platforms.

Keep the meetings to a minimum – “Our most precious resource is time,” one staffer said, and meetings cut into it far too much of it. On a related subject, some of us bemoaned the fact that our editors sit too far away. We have to schedule meetings to talk to them. When editors and reporters are right next to each other, they can be, essentially, communicating eight hours a day – without actually losing any time at all. Ideas fly freely back and forth, which is conducive to great story ideas.

A renewed appreciation for good writing skills – Some felt that great writing is not recognized or encouraged enough. Writing is our craft; we need to take pride in it.

Our ideas and observations are hardly radical or groundbreaking. Yet they stem from our best judgment and our gut instincts that we don't have to re-invent the ancient art of journalism. We simply have to produce it to a high standard and then try to deliver it in a form that people demand.