

# Full disclosure

The New England News Forum pulls back the curtain on local journalism

BY DAN KENNEDY

**LESS THAN A** year after its launch, the New England News Forum is a work in progress. At a time when the mainstream media are under assault from bloggers, political partisans, and an unprecedented financial squeeze, the Forum has the potential to educate the public about the importance of journalism in a democratic society, while at the same time holding journalists up to scrutiny. Precisely how that is to happen, though, has yet to come into focus.

Based at UMass–Amherst, the fledgling organization has so far sponsored a few public events and launched a hodgepodge of a Web site at [www.newenglandnews.org](http://www.newenglandnews.org). The main purpose, organizers say, is education. And a panel discussion they sponsored in May at the Boston Public Library may give some idea about how the Forum could contribute to the civic life of the region.

John Wilpers, the editor of *BostonNOW*, a free weekday tabloid, was explaining that his morning news meetings are broadcast live on the Internet, with viewers typing in comments that he and his staff read on the spot. One morning, he said, someone listening to an idea being pitched wrote, “I’m bored already, and you haven’t even written the story.” Wilpers continued: “So we killed the story. We thought about it and said, yeah, they’re right, that was a boring story. It was a government story. Journalists tend to be somewhat drawn to government stories. Maybe it’s some new DNA they pick up when they get their diploma.”

Wilpers was funny and ingratiating, and everyone had a good laugh. Later, though, one of his fellow panelists took him on.

“Part of what you said, John, gave me a little bit of a creepy feeling,” said Ellen Hume, a veteran journalist who is now the director of the Center on Media and Society, at UMass–Boston. “You’ve got to cover government. I don’t want to kill the government stories.”

Whereupon Wilpers replied, “I would never kill a story just because a blogger or a viewer of the webcast didn’t like it. I’m not going to turn my newsroom over to whoever happens to be watching.”

Was this a breakthrough moment in media

transparency? Well, perhaps not. But it was a useful look into how decisions are made in a newsroom, even one as unorthodox as *BostonNOW*’s. Moreover, it’s a moment that has been preserved, as the entire panel discussion can be viewed on the Forum’s Web site.

Let’s give Wilpers the benefit of the doubt and assume that the particular government story he killed was, in fact, pretty much guaranteed to induce narcolepsy. The point is that larger issues got an airing. No editor wants to bore his readers, but in a self-governing society, the media have an indispensable role in bringing to the public the information it needs, regardless of its entertainment value. It’s a perpetual conflict—and if the Forum can’t resolve it, it’s nevertheless a dilemma worth talking about.

**THE FIRST THING** organizers want you to know is that they do not intend for the News Forum to devolve into yet another outlet for media-bashing. “The folks in mainstream media are vitally important to participatory democracy,” says Bill Densmore, a former newspaper publisher who serves as the Forum’s director and editor. “We are not a watchdog group if the watchdog’s role is to go bite the mailman. It’s to assess the mailman and educate the dogs about the mailman’s role.”

What does that mean in practice? One answer is that the Forum aims to be a less formal version of the Minnesota News Council, which helped launch the New England group by awarding it a two-year, \$75,000 grant from the Knight Foundation. That council, along with a similar organization in Washington state, includes citizens and professional journalists who hear complaints about media organizations, investigates those complaints, and renders a judgment. (The complainant must agree not to sue for libel before the council will take on a case.) The concept got its widest airing in 1996, when *60 Minutes* broadcast a report on the Minnesota News Council’s finding that a local television station had sensationalized a report about airline safety. There is no punishment other than public

criticism.

The New England News Forum is not as focused on outcomes. Visitors to its Web site can suggest “case studies” for the Forum to follow up on. They can involve privacy, diversity, coverage emphasis, conflicts of interest, citizen journalism—whatever. If all goes as planned, the Forum will assign someone (most likely from the UMass journalism department) to interview people on all sides of an issue and put together an analysis that would be posted on the Web. After that, citizens—including expert “facilitators” whom Densmore and company hope to recruit—will offer their own opinions and responses online.

“We’re envisioning this as an online conversation,” says UMass journalism professor Norman Sims, the Forum’s principal investigator, drawing a careful distinction between a “conversation” and a “hearing.” He adds, “It’s not an adversarial relationship. It’s in a lower key. I have nothing against heated debate, but I think in the political climate right now, people aren’t talking to each other, they’re talking past each other.”

Says Larry Parnass, managing editor of the Northampton-based *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, who’s been helping the Forum refine its approach to putting together those online analyses: “I think it’s arrogant to say we’re responsive enough.

We ask people all the time to play our game and answer our questions.”

Unlike the media reporting and criticism that already appears in mainstream outlets, the Forum is intended as a vehicle for citizens’ voices as well. Forum adviser Lisa Williams, who founded the Watertown blog H2otown.info and who tracks local blogs across the world at Placeblogger.com, pictures the organization as a gathering spot for people who “feel that they have a stake and have something to say about journalism as we’re practicing it here.”

(A disclosure: I’ve been involved in some peripheral activities with the Forum, including taking part in a panel discussion in April. However, I declined Densmore’s invitation to become a dues-paying member because I knew I would be reporting on it.)

Now, this sounds well and good. But we all know that, every once in a while, the mailman deserves to have a large hunk of flesh torn out of his hind quarters. When someone has been done wrong by a news organization, the last thing she wants is to have a “conversation.” What she really wants is justice. Is the News Forum concept too wimpy?

No, says UMass journalism professor Ralph Whitehead, the Forum’s research consultant, who argues that deep changes in the media environment make the old news coun-

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cil idea untenable. We're in a moment, he says, that is marked by "an increasing concentration of media power and at the same time a dramatic leveling of the playing field." As Whitehead puts it, even as Rupert Murdoch attempts to add the *Wall Street Journal* to his vast holdings, the editors of major newspapers such as *The Boston Globe* must pay attention to what a proliferating swarm of bloggers is saying about them. "We want to hold the mainstream media accountable, but they're much more fragile now," Whitehead says.

Gary Gilson, the retired executive director of the Minnesota News Council, who was involved in approving the Knight grant for the New England News Forum, is intrigued

## The News Forum avoids a 'media-bashing' model.

by the course being charted by the UMass folks. "We have a lot to learn from them," he says. "It's partly because of the changing nature of communications. And it's partly because Densmore is such a wiz on the interactive use of the Internet."

Gilson points to another reason that it makes sense for Densmore to strike out in a different direction. The 37-year-old Minnesota model works because the media organizations themselves founded the council and helped fund it. Without similar cooperation in New England, it makes little sense to try to replicate that system. Adds another Forum adviser, Laurisa Sellers, a former member of the Minnesota News Council who's now assistant director of corporate and foundation relations at Simmons College: "The hearings are sexy and fun, but they can make muddy what the purpose of a news council is about."

Indeed, news councils have always been controversial. In the 1970s and early '80s, a National News Council attempted to call attention to standards and ethics throughout the media industry, and its findings were published in full in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Among its last reports was a thorough post-mortem of how Janet Cooke, late of the *Washington Post*, was able to win a 1981 Pulitzer Prize for reporting on an 8-year-old heroin addict who did not actually exist. "It's always useful to have greater public understanding of news media. Speaking as a former newspaper editor and publisher, it's ironic, but I don't know that we do a particularly good job of communicating to the public how we work," says Loren Gighlione, who was a member of the National News Council. Gighlione, who's advising the New England News Forum, is the former dean of the

Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University (he's currently a professor there), and the former publisher and editor of *The News* in Southbridge.

Trouble was, as Gighlione observes, some powerful media organizations, including the editors of *The New York Times*, refused to take part, arguing that it was up to them to enforce their standards, not an outside group. It's a view that many editors continue to hold, including Bill Ketter, a veteran Massachusetts newspaper editor who's now vice president for news for Community Newspaper Holdings Inc., a Birmingham, Alabama-based chain that owns several Massachusetts papers, most notably *The Eagle-Tribune* of Lawrence.

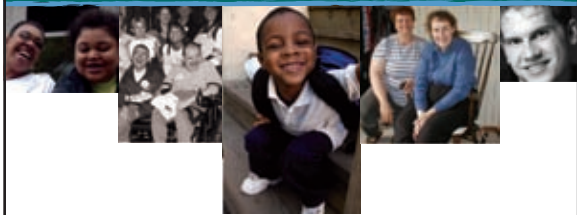
"Each news organization is responsible for its own conduct, and I don't like the notion of a press-oversight body or a so-called grievance committee," says Ketter, also an adviser to the New England News Forum. "My position has always been that each news organization is responsible for its own behavior."

Ketter adds: "I don't have any problem with an organization such as the New England News Forum holding public forums on journalism issues and problems. I would not want them to get involved in specific cases."





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## MASS.MEDIA

**SMALL AND BALDING**, wiry and intense, Bill Densmore has crafted a peripatetic career: Among other things, he has worked for the Associated Press and Crain's *Business Insurance Magazine*, is a former owner of the weekly *Williamstown Advocate*, has run Hancock Shaker Village, in Pittsfield, and is the founder of Clickshare Service Corporation. Clickshare developed a simple technology to make online purchases—something Densmore hopes will eventually be adopted by newspaper executives as they come to realize they'll never be able to make a go of it by giving away their content.

Densmore was also the force behind the Media Giraffe conference at UMass–Amherst last summer, a four-day event that brought together several hundred folks from the new and old media to talk about the future of news. This past April, he threw the News Forum's coming-out party: an all-day conference at UMass–Lowell, with more than 100 people attending discussions on subjects such as legal-liability issues for bloggers and efforts to create a shield law for reporters in Massachusetts. There have been a few smaller events as well, such as the panel at the Boston Public Library and a similar discussion at the Springfield City Library.

Despite this flurry of activity, building the News Forum into a vital part of the public conversation is a daunting task. We live in a climate awash with media criticism, from academic think tanks to hundreds of media-related blogs. As Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and a former media reporter for *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Phoenix*, puts it, "While there's always room for more, they might have to find a way to bring something to the table that others don't."

Densmore is well aware of that. Over lunch at the UMass–Amherst faculty club and in an interview in Norman Sims's office, he offers a laundry list of ideas that he'd like to pursue—contracted ombudsman services (he offers the example of the Washington News Council, which was recently retained by the Spokane *Spokesman-Review* to assess its coverage of a commercial development owned by its parent company); First Amendment and freedom-of-information advocacy; and educational services aimed at public schools.

"The work we have to do now is a selling job," he says. "It's letting people know we have these ideas and finding out which ones they're interested in using. Media issues have become a civic-engagement/political issue that garners intense interest. I hope we can figure out how to tap into that interest." **CW**

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*Dan Kennedy is a visiting assistant professor at Northeastern University's School of Journalism. His blog, Media Nation, is at [medianation.blogspot.com](http://medianation.blogspot.com), and he can be reached at [da.kennedy@neu.edu](mailto:da.kennedy@neu.edu).*