

President's Report

Charlotte Hall

April 25, 2009

This year will go down as a watershed year for ASNE, as it will for our industry. The theme I announced last April, Editors Leading Change, has taken on profound meaning as an avalanche of bad economic news has threatened our craft, our business and ASNE itself.

The top headlines for ASNE this year:

1. We canceled the innovative convention we had planned because very few editors could attend. We retooled the programming and offered our members a “virtual convention.”
2. We dropped “paper” from our name and broadened ASNE’s membership eligibility, both moves reflecting the rapid growth of digital journalism.

Yet those headlines tell only part of the story. Amid the industry turmoil, ASNE had a very active year. We found new ways to support our members, and we maintained our steadfast commitment to the core values of public service journalism, open access to information, the First Amendment, diversity, journalism education and innovation.

Here are some details of the year’s activities.

ASNE retools for the future. With newspapers in distress, our membership continued to slide. Meanwhile, the online news world mushroomed and university journalism programs became centers of innovation. We proposed a major change in our composition to reflect journalism today and a corresponding change in our name. We rewrote the bylaws, extending membership eligibility to leaders of online-only news Web sites and leaders of academic journalism programs, changing our name to the American Society of News Editors, and allowing for a broadening of board makeup through appointment of two additional board members. This spring, our members overwhelmingly approved the changes. ASNE is now officially “platform neutral.”

Webinars take off. Our Innovation Committee, headed by Jennifer Carroll and Milton Coleman, launched our first-ever series of Webinars last fall. The early topics ranged from “Passion Sites—Niche Web Sites” to “Unlocking the Mystery of Sports Credentials.” Thanks to strong programming and the efforts of staffers Cristal Williams and Suzanne Martin, the five early Webinars were a hit. They touched a chord: the need for high-quality, affordable training that newsroom leaders can access conveniently and without cost. We have also made recordings of the Webinars available on our Website.

Our convention goes digital. With strong leadership by the Program Committee, co-chaired by John Temple and George Stanley, we reinvented our convention program, focusing on useful and cutting-edge workshops organized along four tracks. Despite tremendous efforts by the staff to promote the convention and attract sponsors, the officers faced a painful choice early in the year: have a convention with very few editors in attendance or cancel. While we decided to cancel, we committed ourselves to presenting as much of the programming as possible in digital format, free to our members. We have spread the sessions over April and May, so members can participate an hour here and an hour there, choosing the sessions that are most relevant to them. The Webinar format has proved flexible and has included live streaming of some presenters. By the end of May, we will have conducted 12 sessions, ranging from “Twitterverse” to the ASNE Census to a conversation with Lee Abrams of Tribune Company. We charged \$50 for nonmembers and had brought in \$2,000 in revenue as of the third week in

April. As an unexpected bonus, some editors are considering membership. One small newspaper editor signed up for three sessions, then figured out it was more cost effective to join ASNE and get the Webinars free.

Communication increases with a newsletter and editor chats. Early in 2009, we launched the Editors' Exchange, a monthly online newsletter that includes timely news, from a report from editors who attended CNN's marketing conference to links to editors' columns about the state of journalism. Thanks goes to Cristal Williams and Suzanne Martin for getting it going. It shows great promise to expand in content and frequency as we increase our digital communication with members. We also are near the finish line on a redesign of our Website for better functionality. In another initiative to help members in tough times, we recently launched Editor Chats, off-the-record phone conversations that allow editors to de-stress with a small group of peers—much like the corner bar conversations at our convention. They are moderated by Butch Ward of Poynter.

FOI focuses on digital records. We have moved aggressively on the next big FOI challenge, access to digitized public records. The FOI Committee, chaired by Andy Alexander and Tim Franklin, conducted a major audit of 135 newspaper Websites and their ability to help readers access public information online. Committee member Pete Weitzel spearheaded the audit. The results show the wide range of information available and will be a resource for editors as they build online databases. The project also identified 15 Websites that did the best overall job of presenting public records. We will soon present information from the audit in a user-friendly format on our Web site. Another digital initiative came as part of Sunshine Week, which this year surveyed papers across the country about state government information online. It found that while more government records are being posted, some of the most important information is still not online, and in some cases governments are charging taxpayers to access records.

Advocacy for the shield law and openness bears fruit. We continued our energetic campaign on the Hill for a federal Shield Law, which is now wending its way through Congress with good chances for passage. We joined with the Sunshine in Government Initiative in discussions with President Obama's transition team on openness and transparency in the new administration. We were gratified when one of President Obama's first acts were two memoranda and an executive order promising maximum access to government information through FOIA and to presidential records through the Presidential Records Act. ASNE counsel Kevin Goldberg continued to assist members on FOI and access issues. Tim Franklin and Kevin have led our efforts on sport credentials, partnering with APSE in fighting against sports teams' attempts to restrict digital coverage of events.

News literacy partnerships sprout. Under the leadership of Education Committee chairman Rex Smith and Senior Project Manager Diana Mitsu Klos, ASNE became an active partner in the news literacy movement—an important initiative to teach young people in high schools and colleges how to become discerning consumers of news and information in the digital world. We co-sponsored a seminar at Poynter in the summer on news literacy, attracting newspaper editors, journalism educators, digital journalists and young people. That seminar sparked partnerships and broadened the knowledge base about news literacy. Rex and Diana also attended a major conference at SUNY Stony Brook, which has had a seminal role in developing a news literacy curriculum and promoting the concept. This summer, we will sponsor two news literacy sessions at the AEJMC convention. Our work is helping spread new literacy discussions to other academic institutions.

High school journalism flourishes. In its ninth year, our program continues to grow rapidly under Diana Mitsu Klos's leadership. The number of high school newspaper Web sites we host doubled in a year to 2,700, the largest source of teen-generated news in the world. Meanwhile our journalism education Web site, hsj.org, also grew steadily to 40,000 unique visitors monthly, and our high school ad network now has 900 papers. Knight Foundation has been the lead supporter of this project from the start and its funding has helped us drive our burgeoning Web presence. In another initiative, we increased the number of summer institutes for high school teachers from three to five, with Reynolds Foundation funding, and the number of applications for this summer is the highest in the history of the program. Training high school advisors in diverse, urban schools remains a major focus of the program.

Liberty Tree takes root: Under Ken Paulson's leadership, our First Amendment Committee is launching First Amendment festivals on college campuses with support of the McCormick Foundation. The first will occur April 30 at Berry College in Georgia. The committee also has developed and tested the creative work for a public campaign promoting the five freedoms. While funding for a broad advertising campaign became elusive in the recession, the effort will focus on public service announcements in newspapers, broadcast and digital outlets.

Commitment to diversity remains strong. ASNE continued to promote diversity leadership through activities at UNITY—a Diversity Leadership Institute for aspiring editors and a mentoring breakfast—and its two annual awards programs, the Robert McGruder Award for Diversity Leadership (presented jointly with APME and the Freedom Forum), and the third year of our Pacesetter Awards for the papers with the best diversity records in the annual ASNE Census. ASNE held a Webinar to release the Census numbers and is pursuing discussions on preserving newsroom diversity amid industry shrinkage. ASNE is merging its diversity and audience development efforts with the approach of the 2010 U.S. Census, expected to show the country is moving toward “majority minority.”

We make a strategic visit to Venezuela. A group of 20 traveled to Venezuela in May for a five-day fact-finding visit to one of the hemisphere's top hot spots. The delegation met with top Venezuelan officials, the U.S. ambassador (subsequently expelled), business people, opposition leaders and media leaders. The visit culminated in seven hours with Hugo Chavez, a press conference and then a private meeting. Neil Brown was chair of the International Committee; Milton Coleman and Edward Seaton were instrumental in arranging our meetings and dealing with the Venezuelan government. Many of our delegation wrote articles and columns that received wide exposure in print and online.

I have been honored to serve this organization, with its rich history and cherished values. I approach the end of my term with humility, hoping that I have helped a little to show the way to the future, but knowing there is so much still to do. I want to thank the other officers and the board for their support and wise counsel through a tumultuous year. We are blessed with strong leaders. I am also very grateful to our members for their many emails of support and advice through our tough decisions.

Finally, I want to thank Scott and the ASNE staff, who work tirelessly for us every day. Without them, we would accomplish very little. This year, especially, they have performed heroically. Their can-do spirit, their commitment to our common cause, their energy and innovative spirit have enabled us to forge a new course.