

North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA)

Session #2

Using the SNS as a platform for vendor voices

Notes

Presenter: Erin Anderson, INSP volunteer

Paraphrased notes by: Cydney Gillis, Real Change

Erin: I got involved with street newspapers in 2001 at Real Change, Seattle. Later worked with street papers internationally and worked for the International Network of Street Papers (INSP) in Scotland.

Participants introduce themselves and say whether or not they have a blog.

Erin: Sounds like people are using blogs for a lot of purposes, most incorporating editorial content or marketing. This workshop focuses on a new way to use blogs to connect with vendors and community based writing.

The project's idea – it emerged out of conversations with street paper editors involved in a working group at INSP on redeveloping the Street News Service.

[referring to overhead project] This is the new SNS website. They've hired an editor for the Street News Service. For those who are not familiar with the site, it's a venue for sharing content on an Internet-based forum that allows readers who are interested in street papers to see what's going on around the world and for street papers themselves to share content.

When this working group was working on the key issues with the Street News Service in 2007, one thing was the website and its need for an editor and the lack of participation by vendors in SNS. It's not bringing the voices in local papers to a global audience. Some of the content that does get published is written by vendors, but not a very high proportion, and it's gone through the editorial filters of the published street papers.

The idea of the project originally was it was going to be part of the Street News Service (SNS) platform. It's now going to be a button that links from the SNS website to a site of content by vendors.

It's an alternative forum for vendors to participate and collaborate. NASNA and SNS are good at bringing together all of us to collaborate, but that kind of international community building is not happening really well for vendors.

There's a general theme of the project – thinking about place and the street paper movement as a movement rooted in cities all over the world, to create a global map of vendor voices, allowing them to contribute in broad ways.

The basic structure of the platform is a central hub administrated by INSP – it's called the Global Vendor Blog Project. I used WordPress 3.0 to create a multisite network of blogs, which currently has one node (Real Change).

A staff person as INSP will administrate this hub, which serves as a global portal for each paper's vendor blog. Each street newspaper can request a blog on the hub. There's currently one on the hub – Real Change, where I did a pilot with vendors. This workshop is to recruit all of you to the project.

The platform may develop, but right now I'm working on the structure of it.

Each local paper that has a blog is able to sign up their own vendor contributors to the blog to post content and comment on the posts of others. A core part of this project is offering some kind of blogging workshops for vendors.

The cool thing about this project is it's a way to link vendor voices with a global audience. The Global Vendor Blog Project is a generic name I'm currently using until something better arises.

www.insp-blog.org

The site has a translator built into it. It's not polished but it offers an immediate way into the blog project without having to translate. It is a bit rough. It's a step up from the current way the SNS functions, which is to use a network of volunteer translators that INSP recruits when it needs an article translated. It's not that efficient.

What this does is allow vendors to participate, to contribute without having to write to a certain publishable standard, which obviously varies, to have an informal, inviting entrance to contribute their voices. What I think is coolest is vendors can write for one another, instead of an outside audience. It allows community building. The idea is to read writing of other vendors and be involved in a fluid way and build communication between papers through their vendors.

It has a capacity for multimedia work – photography, audio blogging. A lot of vendors I know are great talkers who have a lot to say. There's a free open-source software called Audacity that you can download. You can record your voice, edit it and post a short audio piece.

For papers with more resources, video work can be posted. Some papers are already doing that and DVDs.

Reviewing the site (referring to overhead projection) – the list of papers will go on the left. In the middle there will be a featured blog every week. To the right are the translator buttons and a place to log in (registration).

This is Real Change's blog currently. They designed it. The staff person at INSP is going to be creating the blogs. When someone wants one in the next month, you'd request it from me. They'll create the blog from a basic template with some options to change the appearance. Then the papers will be able to register their own vendor contributors.

This is a post written by Reggie, a vendor I worked with. For the month of June, I worked at Real Change doing blogging workshops with vendors. There were two vendors I worked with pretty solidly for 3 weeks. They had little previous computer experience and they were able to get started blogging. Separately, another volunteer is facilitating weekly blogging workshops in Seattle for the vendors.

The scope of this project in terms of participation – some papers are just starting out and trying to get a paper out and this may not be something they're going to be able to contribute to. The idea is to start with the papers with some capacity to support some kind of supported blogging among their vendors at their paper. For example, Real Change and Streetwise have computer labs. You can also partner with organizations for computer use. Real Change had a partnership in the past with the library to offer workshops. You also need human resources to lead blogging workshops, but it was easy at Real Change to find someone to help with the project. There are tons of bloggers willing to do this work on their own.

We're trying to start small with papers that can handle it. On an international level, we're talking about papers that may not have an office, so there's lots of obstacles. But the idea is that INSP will start writing grants to connect papers with computers so they can participate.

There are a few requirements to participate. I'm developing these as I go. I'm doing this as a volunteer for INSP. I haven't had a lot of support over the last month or so, so this is rough.

- 1) It's only a platform for vendors and former vendors. It should be separate from the organization's other activities. It shouldn't have advertising on it.
- 2) It shouldn't be assumed this content is to be shared the way the Street News Service content is.

Question: Are there any guidelines for content?

Erin: The vendors will be signed up as contributors, not as authors (that is, they won't be able to post directly to the site without someone looking at it). They will submit posts for review to make sure there's no hate speech. Each paper will be responsible for moderating their own blog.

Question: Each paper will have a link to this on their website?

Erin: That would be great. It would be linked from the SNS and INSP sites.

Michael: The vendors get no compensation for their stories?

Erin: Unless the paper has the cash. It is on a voluntary basis, unless a paper develops a system of some kind of compensation. It's a platform for people to learn computer skills and have a platform for their writing – that there are benefits inherent that will encourage people to participate. People in the very worst conditions are not going to be able to participate.

Michael: My paper pays people to write stories.

Becky: One rule is you're not allowed to put the blogs in your paper and sell them, so there's no need to pay for the stories.

Another participant: You could give them papers to compensate them.

Erin: This is an issue that needs to be considered further.

Participant: What I'm missing is a profile on the blogger ("this is who I am") in order to build up a brand – a person that people follow. I think that would compensate for the contribution.

Erin: There's a capacity to put in a vendor photo. There are different ways to set the byline up. You could set it up to put the photo and byline at the top. This is a very rough foundation.

Another requirement – vendors who wish to remain anonymous can do so.

Becky: Would I receive a notification when a blog is posted?

Erin: You'd see it beforehand. When the vendor creates the post, he or she clicks "submit for review" and it goes to the moderator at the local blog. Because we're trying to encourage participatory structure, try not to be draconian about it, but you will have a chance to ask the vendor or edit or delete and help them repost it. It's not unfiltered.

Becky: What about comments? What if one of my vendors responds – am I notified?

Erin: Yes, you can set it to approve each comment or there are other ways to manage that.

Cyd: Who should moderate?

Erin: That's up to each paper and what your resources are. One thing we're trying to discourage is lots of editing. It's not an editorial function –

Cyd: You're just scanning for hate speech.

Erin: You can have one person administrate the blog and set the notification for blogs and comments go to another person, a volunteer, perhaps. I don't imagine it's going to have a lot of traffic to begin with.

By the end of August, an internal blog forum will be set up for those administrating and teaching blog workshops to collaborate and ask questions and find resources. For example, I found a YouTube video on blogging in 3 minutes. Assuming the word "blog" means something to people is not a good practice.

Would you like a demonstration of how you'd go about posting a blog?

[Erin logs in to the "dashboard" of the WordPress software that the blog is built on.]

The user menu is at the left – that’s where to add a new user. It sends the vendor a temporary password, so they have to have an e-mail address at least to sign up.

There’s a section for Profile. The vendor can choose if they want to be known by full name or a nickname.

For making a post, click New Post. There are boxes to fill in a title and the text of the blog. Photos can be inserted. You can upload a video to YouTube and then embed the link in the text of the blog post. Then click Save Draft. You then click “Submit for Review” so the post goes to the administrator.

There are sample “home” pages to get started with the blog.

Becky: Let’s say I like something a Real Change vendor has written. Would I see their e-mail or their administrator’s e-mail so I can contact them?

Erin: I don’t think it would be appropriate to have vendor info out there for the broader network, but administrators will be linked to the internal forum. You can negotiate with a vendor to publish a piece.

One thing I’d be interested in hearing from people is – first of all, what people would need at the local paper to be able to participate. If you’re miles away and there’s no point or if someone sees a problem that might constrain them from participating.

Question: Can you define who can be involved? Is it limited to vendors? Homeless? Formerly homeless?

Erin: The concept grew out of finding ways to help vendors contribute to Street News Service. If there’s interest outside the vendor population, perhaps it’s worth putting that to INSP and the project.

I do think there’s something nice about setting a boundary around vending and that experience.

About teaching blogging workshops, some things work and don’t work. I’ll put all that on the INSP site with the tools by the end of August.

For those who need more information on getting started, you can contact me at erinand@gmail.com.