

# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

DIGITAL NEWSBOOK

## Voyages of Discovery Into New Media



**‘to promote and elevate  
the standards of journalism’**

Agnes Wahl Nieman  
the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation

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The articles in this Digital Newsbook were first published in the Spring 2009 Nieman Reports.

This Nieman Reports Digital Newsbook was produced in cooperation with the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, MO. Internet address: [www.rjionline.org](http://www.rjionline.org).



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# The New Front Page: The Digital Revolution

A former newspaper editor figures out how to fund serious digital journalism with an annual budget less than what newsrooms sometimes spent on one investigative project.

BY JOEL KRAMER

A lot of pixels are being spilled these days reflecting on the future of newspapers, news, journalists and journalism. I spent my career in newspapers, first as a journalist and later as a publisher, and I left when the business was financially near its peak. With the for-profit model now shriveling, I've spent the past 16 months trying to build one example of what might be coming next—a not-for-profit enterprise providing high-quality regional journalism on the Web.

Here are some reflections from that battlefield.

MinnPost is a certain kind of nonprofit journalism enterprise—one that aims to eventually break-even on operating revenues, such as advertising, sponsorship, membership and perhaps other sources such as syndication.

This is different from a pure phil-

anthropic endeavor, like ProPublica, which (at least in its current plan) depends for its success on the continuing generosity of foundations or very large individual donors.

MinnPost has had early support from major donors and foundations, and we believe that serious journalism is a community asset, not just a consumer good, which is why we're nonprofit. But we are focused on breaking even by 2011, or at the latest 2012, without relying on foundation support to keep the lights on.

Why? Because (a) we think it's possible to reach breakeven; and (b) we think it's desirable, since foundations already have so many causes to support, and it's questionable whether they have the capacity to support journalism on the expansive scale that may be needed to replace what's being lost, especially regionally, in the for-profit industry.

We can argue the merits and demerits of each approach and, in our age of digital experimentation, it seems wise to let every flower bloom. But it's important to understand MinnPost's approach, to make sense of my dispatch from the frontlines.

## Traffic

We draw our MinnPost members—more on how people become one later—from among our readers, and because the inventory we have to sell to advertisers is our page views, traffic to our Web site, MinnPost.com, is critical to our financial success.

Google Analytics tells us exactly how many times each item we publish gets read. This has a powerful effect. It makes us want to do more of what gets read, and less of what doesn't, while remaining true to our mission.

What does this mean? A glance at MinnPost lets a visitor know that it's for serious newsreaders. Our brochure proudly declares, "NO Britney. NO Paris. NO Lindsay." MinnPost is not a place to visit for stories about entertainment celebrities, or sex, crime and advice for the lovelorn—even though we know that such content would bulk up our page views.

The screenshot shows the MinnPost.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the MinnPost logo and 'ArtsArena' branding. Below that, the date 'Friday, February 23, 2009' is displayed. The main content area features a large article with a photo of two men, likely related to the 'Climate spokesman' headline at the bottom. To the left, there's a 'POLITICAL AGENDA' sidebar with several small portraits and text. To the right, there's an 'ARTSARENA' section and a 'COMMUNITY VOICES' section. The bottom of the page has a 'MinnPost APPALACHIANS' section and a 'Climate spokesman: Ex-creator got a job to pay the bills' headline.

