



The Bakersfield *Californian* and Blogging the Courtroom Epilogue

Union President Steve Swenson did pay attention to Jessica Logan's email. He spoke to both Web Editor Davin McHenry and Executive Editor Mike Jenner about what might be improved. No radical changes resulted, however. Logan's blog continued essentially unchanged for the duration of the trial; she provided a kind of transcript of court proceedings. On May 15, 2007, a jury found Vincent Brothers guilty, and on May 29 it recommended the death penalty. On September 27, 2007, a judge sentenced him to death. Logan's trial blog stopped with an entry recording that decision. In October 2007, Logan left the paper for another reporting job.

The trial, recalls Jenner, was one of the biggest stories the news organization had ever covered. Brothers had been a highly respected, charismatic member of the community. There was no physical evidence to link him to the murders, only circumstantial evidence. "It was our story, and we wanted to own it," says Jenner.¹ He had thought the Bakersfield *Californian* would be able to stream video from the courtroom to run on its website, but the judge forbade that for fear a juror's face might inadvertently be revealed. Logan's blog was one way the paper tried to make up for the lack of real-time video.

In retrospect, comments Jenner, "I can see it [the blog] wasn't that great a product... Maybe my expectations were too high." He had hoped the blog would bring immediacy to the *Californian's* coverage, and record telling moments, such as when leading defense attorneys watched from the gallery, or the look on the face of a family member. "I didn't envision it as a transcript," says Jenner. Still, he does not regret attempting to blog the trial, and would do it again—with the right trial, the right reporter, and clearer expectations.

Jenner suggests that if Logan was unhappy with her assignment, she could have invited her supervising editor to the courtroom to see first-hand what she was complaining about. But he had seen the blog as an opportunity for a reporter to make a distinctive mark: "This story was a

¹ Jenner's remarks are from talks he gave at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, New York, NY, on April 16, 2008.

reporter's dream." Moreover, the attempt to blog from the courtroom was in keeping with the paper's general philosophy. He says:

We have a very ambitious newsroom. We probably try to do too much.
But we feel we're in a knife fight for our survival [as a news organization].
We try to bite off more than we can chew on a regular basis.

That ambition has not been limited to the newsroom. The *Californian* was the only newspaper in the country to try to preempt the arrival of craigslist.com—a sales and social networking website which typically drained classified advertising from newspapers—by establishing a local competitor. The resulting website—Bakotopia.com—did not stop Craigslist, but it did provide a forum for area musicians to exchange news and ideas.

The paper maintained its reputation for innovation and a creative use of technology. By 2007, for example, all reporters had been introduced to video technology, and increasingly they carried inexpensive video cameras on assignment, using them to complement their traditional reporting. Staff were encouraged to improve their video skills through informal, and fun, Friday morning group video review sessions.

In keeping with its belief that its prospects for growth lay with a digital product, the newsroom pushed harder to break its print-centric habits. In winter 2008, the newsroom reorganized to establish to a "Web first" model of news delivery. It also tried to minimize the amount of resources spent in reporting what Jenner calls "commodity" news—such as police reports, fires, collisions, and crime that were covered and offered by all the paper's competitors. To reduce the amount of time reporters spent on such stories, it posted routine press releases from public agencies on a blog. "We have to provide it, but I don't want to spend more time on it than necessary," says Jenner. "We've got to be going deeper with our stories. That's our salvation."

As part of the focus on building a stronger web presence, all reporters were expected to blog, either on blogs specifically about their beats, or as contributors to team blogs. The blogs were expected to reflect the same editorial standards for accuracy and fairness as the paper. "Accuracy is the bedrock of what we do," emphasizes Jenner. "We shouldn't have a separate accuracy standard for blogs." But the paper did not have the staff to screen each posting before it went online. Editing and corrections were done, as a matter of policy, after items were posted.

By mid-2008, the *Californian* had 19 Web-based products, compared to one when Jenner arrived at the paper in 1994. While print circulation was not growing, visitors to its website were up 60 percent over the previous year. The challenge at the *Californian*, as at newsrooms across the country, was to figure out how to translate that increase into additional revenue.