



## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** March 24, 2014  
**FROM:** Joe Skeel, Executive Director  
**SUBJ:** Vision for SPJ  
**FOR:** SPJ Board of Directors

I was asked by the Executive Committee in August to examine the role of SPJ and its place in journalism. Truth be told, I've been doing this since I was hired as Quill editor in December 2004.

But it wasn't until I was named Executive Director in 2009 that my vision of SPJ began to clear a bit. This, of course, is a result of having the opportunity to evaluate, think big picture, study trends, listen to association experts and meet regularly with other journalism organization leaders.

This has brought me to a few overriding – if unpleasant – realizations:

1. Over the past 15-20 years, SPJ leadership has focused too much on internal matters and not enough on external issues. (Membership vs. journalism).
2. There isn't a single group in the United States that is effectively serving the watchdog/advocacy role on behalf of the profession.
3. SPJ will likely not survive as a membership association – as we define membership today.

I realize this may be hard to read. But I should also point out that I don't see SPJ dying any time soon. We could remain on course for the next few decades. But 50 years from now, if it remains on its current path, I do believe SPJ will be non-existent (or most certainly less relevant).

I also realize that I am one person, with one opinion. There is no guarantee that my beliefs would play out if things remain unchanged. That's why everything I present below contains a critical element: flexibility.

By implementing changes to alter our current path, I believe SPJ can remain vital and relevant long into the future. And if my thoughts are off base a bit, these gradual changes still give SPJ the ability to adapt along the way. The key here is to evolve slowly, as outside forces exert pressure and change the circumstances. It's not healthy to change course suddenly based on the opinions of a select few. When posed with the question "what is SPJ's role in journalism," my answer is simple: To be a leader in the industry on all fronts – advocacy, training, membership, etc. But the more I pondered, the more I realized the question wasn't broad enough.

SPJ doesn't want to just improve journalism. Our mission is based on the belief that SPJ will strive to improve and protect democracy. We do that *through* journalism.

So, the real question is:

### **How can SPJ most positively impact and protect democracy through journalism?**

Incidentally, the answer lies mostly within SPJ's mission statement. We simply need to think differently about how to accomplish these goals.

Our mission:

*The Society of Professional Journalists is dedicated to the perpetuation of a free press as the cornerstone of our nation and our liberty.*

*To ensure that the concept of self-government outlined by the U.S. Constitution remains a reality into future centuries, the American people must be well informed in order to make decisions regarding their lives, and their local and national communities.*

*It is the role of journalists to provide this information in an accurate, comprehensive, timely and understandable manner.*

*It is the mission of the Society of Professional Journalists:*

- To promote this flow of information.*
- To maintain constant vigilance in protection of the First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press.*
- To stimulate high standards and ethical behavior in the practice of journalism.*
- To foster excellence among journalists.*
- To inspire successive generations of talented individuals to become dedicated journalists.*
- To encourage diversity in journalism.*
- To be the pre-eminent, broad-based membership organization for journalists.*
- To encourage a climate in which journalism can be practiced freely.*

Since 1909, we have felt the best way to achieve these goals is through individual members. The more journalists that are exposed to our mission, the greater likelihood we would be successful in improving and protecting journalism. They would be better journalists, carry the torch in their newsrooms and communities, and democracy would be better because of our grass-roots efforts.

For the first 75 years of SPJ, this was a decent approach. It works fairly well when the majority of journalists are in your ranks. It still works well if you have 15,000-20,000 members. And, frankly, we didn't have the ability to reach the masses like we do today. Grass-roots was the only option for much of SPJ's life.

Today, however, there are fewer journalists in general. Furthermore, there are about 65 journalism associations in the United States. All are dedicated to a niche, whether it's a beat, medium, ethnic group, etc., etc. They can provide specific resources and training better than SPJ. In many instances, they provide more value to these individuals than SPJ ever could. More associations are sure to pop up as the profession and technology evolves.

Because SPJ is the most broad-based, we can't realistically compete with these groups within their areas of expertise.

The fight for members has led to the journalism association landscape becoming introverted. We are all so concerned with doing everything we can to appeal to members, few take enough time to look outside its own walls. Nobody has an eye on the bigger picture. (*Realization #2*). Ironically, our own mission statement dictates that we do this.

Lastly, fewer people in general are joining a professional association of any kind. Because of the internet, there are plenty of resources available. And younger generations don't necessarily feel the need to meet "face-to-face" in order to network and find jobs. They will do so if it's an option. They still see value in it, but don't necessarily see it as more important than getting necessary skills, etc. If forced to choose, they will forgo the networking as we know it.

It is this cultural shift, and the vast options for membership associations, that leads me to the conclusion that SPJ membership will continue to decline – or at the very least remain stagnant. It will never return to the level necessary to meet our goals via grass-roots efforts.

As of today, SPJ still has the market cornered on the chapter structure. It's the only local option for many journalists. And we have name recognition. However, other associations are beginning to launch their own chapters – with enthusiastic leadership. Some of our own chapters have seen so much value in what others can offer, they are deciding to become "joint" chapters. Georgia and DePaul are billed as SPJ/ONA chapters. NAHJ has chapters popping up. Not long from now, we won't be the only game in town. And over time, as the numbers dwindle, it will be even harder to find good chapter leaders. Our chapters will likely get worse. Our name won't carry the same weight. Over time, it stands to reason, SPJ will become less important. (*Realization #3*).

What is SPJ without a strong membership base? How would we achieve our mission? Wouldn't we lose our collective voice if we had no members? How could we afford to do anything without a hefty membership base supporting us financially?

It is these questions that led SPJ down a path of chasing its own membership tail. It's a common situation that many associations find themselves in – usually induced by survival instincts. As numbers drop, the first instinct is to do whatever necessary to fix the problem. Groups begin to look inward, focusing their attention and resources on their own processes, procedures, programs, marketing, services, special deals, gimmicks, etc., – all aimed at turning the membership tide. These groups often lose sight of what made them appealing in the first place – their mission.

Caught up in survival, these groups rarely stop to ask: Is this change out of our control? Better yet, would we be better off focusing our attention elsewhere and re-inventing who we are to achieve our mission? Is there another way?

In just the past two years, SPJ has spent considerable time and money on the following topics – all aimed at membership. This list, of course, isn't inclusive of all that we have done, and it doesn't include all committee work or the day-to-day management of membership. But it will give you a good idea of the major stuff:

- Hiring Tara, a full-time chapter coordinator (and the time spent managing chapters).
- Revamping the Scripps Leadership Program.
- Assessing the state of chapters – and deactivating several.
- Revamping the annual report (several times).
- Discussing and eliminating the star ranking system.
- Hiring a part-time caller to contact new and renewing members.
- Upgrading the online join/renew process.
- Auto-dues membership billing.
- Creating newsroom memberships.
- Creating an international chapter plan.
- One member-one vote (and bylaws changes).
- SPJ name change.
- SPJ Solutions.
- Developing communities.
- Chapter leaders training sessions at EIJ.

Think of your last few board meetings, and come up with things that weren't related to membership, chapters or governance. What stands out? Could you think of anything? How many things can you think of that were related to improving and protecting journalism directly – not through a membership/governance function? (*Realization #1*).

This memo is not meant to criticize in any way, shape or form. It's a natural behavior. Furthermore, the board of directors has to manage the Society's governance/operational structure. That's partly why it exists. But, it shouldn't be its only focus.

Our actions (and lack of results) have provided insight into the question: Is this membership decline out of our control? In most respects, I think it is. We can tweak, adjust and alter things here and there. We have been doing this for at least the past five years – likely much longer. But, I don't believe any of these adjustments can lead to a return to the way things used to be. Our best efforts will allow us to stay alive longer, but the climate has changed too dramatically.

We have two choices: Ride it out until the end, or evolve.

I prefer to evolve. Not for the sole purpose of keeping SPJ alive. But because the public needs a group to step up and be a leader in journalism.

With that said, no evolution can happen quickly. We can't ignore our current model, lest our resources will evaporate. Any transition must be a slow one. Therefore, we must continue to invest in membership recruitment and retention efforts. But I think we need to view this as an evolving focus, not our only solution to success and survival. Membership is not an end-game. Improving and protecting democracy is the goal.

Therefore, I believe it's time for SPJ to look beyond membership and chart a course that will still allow us to have maximum impact on the perpetuation of a free press as the cornerstone of our nation and our liberty.

The good news is, we've already laid some groundwork.

### **SEMANTICS OF MEMBERSHIP**

In SPJ's world, an individual who has paid her dues is a member. We also have a handful of institutions that are given membership status. A couple years ago we developed newsroom memberships.

Today, therefore, we have individuals and entities as "members."

What if we went a bit further and we applied the institutional concept to simply include a collective group of people – not defined by their school or place of employment.

What if another journalism association found value in the services that SPJ provides? And those services allow it to direct more energy and resources toward fulfilling its mission – making journalism better. This is no different than a newsroom. Couldn't it be considered a "member" of SPJ if it paid a fee and we provided benefits – similar to an entity or institution?

Let's step back now and look at this scenario: *SPJ membership would consist of individuals, institutions and other journalism associations. All pay some fee. All receive some benefits.*

Now, remove the word "membership" from the statement above.

*SPJ would consist of individuals, institutions and other journalism associations. All pay some fee. All receive some benefits.*

As you have probably realized, this is already taking place. We have individuals, institutions and other journalism organizations that pay for services. We call the latter "association management" as opposed to "membership."

The difference between these two ideas is the giant hurdle that SPJ leadership must clear. Specifically, leadership must understand that *members* as they are defined today can't be the lifeblood of SPJ.

As a collective group, SPJ still believes the best way to reach its mission is through individuals. It's because this is what we know. And we try to organize those individuals through a chapter structure. We do everything we can to improve our offerings and make our

chapters more effective – leading to more individuals. When it doesn't work, or success is marginal, we try new things. Yet, those new things are still based on the notion that we need more individuals in SPJ's ranks.

It's time for SPJ to move beyond the concept of individuals. For as long as the sun burns, SPJ could continue to fight for individual memberships. We can continue to work on our chapter structure. But as I shared above, I believe no matter how hard we try, it's an unwinnable battle. At our core, we can offer very little that is unique in regards to member benefits. There are fewer people in our business, and other groups have caught up to us in many respects. Finding good, enthusiastic leaders to run chapters gets harder by the day.

This, of course, leads to several questions – which I have pondered for the past four years: If SPJ isn't defined by our members, who are we? What's the point of SPJ and what is our focus? How do we still reach our mission? How do we have a collective voice? And, of course, are we really willing to deconstruct the thing that many find valuable: networking and a sense of community?

In reality, I believe we must remain a “quasi-membership” organization. But it's time we view our structure a bit differently and stop focusing so much of our resources on individuals (and chapters).

### **THE CONAGRA MODEL**

You may recognize the name, but you may not know from where. Its motto: “ConAgra Foods: Making the food you love.”

ConAgra is a conglomerate made up of several different food producers. Here is a brief history: It all started in 1890, when Gilbert C. Van Camp began manufacturing canned pork and beans. A few years later, Central State Flouring Mill is formed. Then along came Hunt Brothers fruit packing company in 1890. In 1919 Nebraska Consolidated Mills was formed, and was made up of a few small operations. In 1920 it launched Peter Pan peanut butter and LaChoy. Also in this year, the Knotts opened their first farm.

Over the years, more independent food producers came onto the scene as Americans desired more pre-packaged food to meet the changes with society. The world was changing. So, Nebraska Consolidated Mills expanded. Chef Boyardee, Parkay, Reditwhip, Marie Callender, Banquet and other notable brands all hit the market – but not under the Nebraska Mills umbrella. They were independently managed, just like the Van Camp company. But over time, these companies were bought up by Nebraska Mills.

By 1969, Nebraska Mills had expanded across the U.S. In 1971, it changed its name to ConAgra and continues to acquire food lines, such as the ones that I mentioned above. It's not uncommon that when a new food line is launched, the inventor approaches ConAgra in hopes they will see value in it. ConAgra provides shelter.

Today, ConAgra is made up of about 45 different food lines. It has evolved by launching its own brands (as it identifies opportunities and gaps in the market) and merging with other

brands. However, you can't walk into a store and buy anything with a big "ConAgra" brand label.

Why?

Because as ConAgra has evolved since 1919, and new products hit the market, it realized the benefit in letting each of those established brands live on. The brand recognition already existed. Individuals found great value and comfort in specific brands. ConAgra believes that it can "produce the foods you love" by doing what it can to help those individual brands succeed.

ConAgra, therefore, helps with research and development. They streamline administrative functions. They speak on Capitol Hill and have their fingers (and money) in the pockets of lawmakers. ConAgra is the company that keeps an eye on the food industry's best interests while allowing the individual brands to focus on what they do best: producing food that people like.

Of course, ConAgra is a multi-million dollar company hell-bent on profits. Their goal is to beat their competitors and corner the market. That should not be SPJ's goal. Journalism (and democracy) is better off if all journalism associations succeed in their own niches.

With that said, I believe that by following the ConAgra concept, SPJ can not only remain relevant and vital to individual journalists, it can have a far greater impact on our profession (and democracy) as a whole. SPJ wouldn't be evolving just to survive. It would become stronger, with one mission in mind. The same mission we have held since 1909 (a decade before ConAgra was born):

*"The perpetuation of a free press as the cornerstone of our nation and our liberty."*

By providing low-cost management services to other journalism associations, or developing other smart partnerships with these groups, SPJ can help those individual groups become more successful. Saving money on their management leaves more for their individual members and missions. And if all 65 journalism associations were better because of this, it stands to reason that journalism in the United States would be better.

SPJ and its partner associations would also be better equipped to educate journalists on all topics because we could more easily cross pollinate our expertise. No group, such as SPJ, would feel the need to be everything to everyone – duplicating efforts of other organizations in an effort to get/keep members. ONA teaching digital media; Education writers teaching education reporters; SPJ experts teaching ethics and freelancing; NAHJ teaching about immigration and diversity issues; NAJA teaching about coverage of Indian Country; RTDNA teaching about broadcasting. The list goes on and on.

Under this model, I believe that SPJ and its partners could turn the tide of waning media credibility. We would have a greater ability to educate the general public because we would have a unified voice to reach the masses. And by streamlining expenses, we would have more

money to reach this goal. Furthermore, as a group representing all journalists, SPJ could more easily call out the unethical journalism that gives the rest of us a bad name. Other groups also wouldn't feel the pressure of having to do so, putting them in awkward positions. I envision a day when news organizations actually care what SPJ and its partners organizations say, and think before they act, lest they face the wrath of the unified profession speaking out against their actions.

Perhaps most important, I believe this model will allow SPJ and its partners to have a loud voice on First Amendment issues. Instead of 65 journalism groups creating noise independently, having no large-scale impact, one group representing all organizations would speak – with 15,000-20,000 journalists behind it. SPJ and its partners would be a unified voice impossible to ignore.

But, what happens to SPJ's members? Perhaps they join other associations. Years from now, perhaps SPJ's value is as a starting point for journalists, until they define their niche – a niche we would put them in touch with. Perhaps they simply stay an individual member of SPJ because they support the cause of advocacy. Perhaps they are members of more than one association (made easy by a unified membership price) because they like the niche training, networking and support the cause. That's OK, too. I'm not advocating that SPJ force anyone away. I'm simply saying that individuals are *a part* of SPJ's organizational structure. Not the whole.

Of course, the big question is this: Would other journalism associations have an interest? Early indications are “yes,” although it won't happen overnight. Many will be skeptical that this is a takeover plot. It may take several years to eliminate that fear and develop a comprehensive partnership where we are all rowing in the same direction. But, you can see bits and pieces of this today.

NAHJ hired us two years ago to manage their bookkeeping and membership. That evolved into a conference partnership. RTDNA joined with us for EIJ in 2011. Beginning last year, we provide bookkeeping services to them. Most recently, I have spoken with two other journalism associations that have an interest in our services. Executive Directors of 8-10 journalism associations meet once a year. We talk about ways to partner. All of us are eager to do it. Oftentimes, it is organizational culture that holds us back.

Regardless, conversations about partnerships are happening now. And NAHJ and RTDNA are proof that this evolution can happen.

### **HOW DO WE EVOLVE?**

I was asked in my review to create a memo that outlined where SPJ should be in 5, 20 and 50 years from now. Everything I have written, culminating in SPJ becoming a management/umbrella organization for other journalism associations, is where I believe SPJ could be in 20-30 years.

Clearly, we can't just flip a switch and make it happen. Getting there will require small changes over time, some of which we have already started. But we must continue to move forward. Conversations with other organizations must continue.

In the next five years...

- SPJ must remain committed to recruiting and retaining members and providing needed support to chapters. Individuals are still the key to our current business model.
- SPJ leadership must get comfortable with the notion that individual memberships and chapters (as we define them today) are not the way SPJ can have the greatest impact on journalism and democracy. Furthermore, it may not even be a path to survival. Leadership's historical view on individual membership must evolve.
- SPJ must continue to create worthwhile partnerships with other journalism associations in order to show its commitment to ensuring all groups thrive. *We have to make it clear that SPJ is not "taking over."* *Doing so would only weaken journalism as a whole, not strengthen it.* These can be conference partnerships, association management partnerships, educational programming partnerships, membership agreements, etc. Without these partnerships, I believe the quality of journalism (and therefore the public's trust) will continue to decline. We must all row in the same direction.
- As these partnerships develop, SPJ could develop a handful of chapters or communities that are made up of members from SPJ and its partners. Ideally, I'd love to see a metro chapter that is THE journalism chapter/group in the area – regardless of individual membership affiliation. I can't see SPJ chapters surviving as we know them now. But I could see a day where chapters/communities actually thrive if membership is made up of journalists from all organizations – or aren't members of any organization.
- SPJ should continue to identify gaps in the journalism world and create communities to address those needs: such as a freelancing community or a young journalists' community.
- SPJ should strive to hire a person/firm dedicated to advocacy/lobbying by the time 2019 rolls around. Beefing up efforts in this area is critical to appealing to a larger audience and cementing SPJ as a legitimate voice that can act on behalf of other journalism associations.
- SPJ Leadership should begin to understand and accept that the current leadership model (based on geography) will likely change over time.
- SPJ will be evaluating if it is on the best path to best improve and protect journalism.

In 20 years, in addition to what I shared above...

- SPJ's network will contain a significant number of journalism associations, including those from overseas.

- SPJ will have individual members that are undecided about their niche or simply support our mission to improve and protect journalism. But many (if not most) will have chosen to join one of our partners.
- SPJ's main priorities will be: management for other journalism associations (membership, accounting, event planning, awards management, etc.) and advocacy/lobbying (public and governments).
- SPJ and the SDX Foundation will work to fill training gaps not covered by other journalism associations, and provide training resources as needed to members of our partner organizations.
- SPJ's board of directors may be made up of leaders from other journalism associations.
- Through efforts with our partners, the public will begin to understand the difference between credible journalism and the "media."
- SPJ and its partners will be a critical voice on journalism matters. We will call out unethical journalism. We will shine the light on government shenanigans. We will push for journalism to be better, because the public deserves it.
- SPJ will be evaluating if it is on the best path to best improve and protect journalism.

In 50 years...

- Most importantly, the public will have regained its faith in journalism, and journalists will be better about keeping elected officials on the straight and narrow -- truly serving its role as the Fourth Estate.
- SPJ will be entrenched as THE collective voice on matters related to journalism and its role in democracy.
- It will be THE group that the general public, governments and news organizations go to when it comes to issues of the press and media credibility.
- It will be THE group that journalists must join, made easy with the array of options created by our thriving partners.
- SPJ's partners will be thriving without the burden of management holding them back.
- SPJ and its partners will continue to welcome new journalism organizations/communities as the media landscape continually evolves.
- SPJ and its partners will ensure that journalism education meets the demands of the day.
- SPJ will be evaluating if it is on the best path to best improve and protect journalism.

Nobody can predict the future. I certainly don't claim to have a crystal ball. What I have outlined are my thoughts and ideas based on my observations and research.

It's quite possible that in 20 years, SPJ realizes there is a better course for its future and what I have laid out is worthless. Flexibility will always be critical. For example, some of the partnerships we develop today may not lead to anything greater. We may never all come

together. Regardless, they are beneficial today. And that makes them worth pursuing, even if you don't agree with the larger vision.

But, it's a fact that SPJ's current path hasn't led to improvements in membership. Media credibility has only gotten worse over the past two decades. Governments are more secret than ever and journalists themselves are looking for someone to help them make sense of it all. No individual journalism organization can fix these problems by itself.

Doing it will require teamwork, which will require sacrifices and risk. It will bring about frustration and frightening changes. There will be disagreements and unpleasant conversations among leaders and partner organizations. Turning the tide and restoring the important role of journalism in democracy will take all of us working together.

But, most importantly, it will require a leading organization to bring everyone together and start the process.

I believe SPJ is best suited to take on this role. And I believe the time is right to start this evolution.