

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

WaPo makes a Switch

The paper's newest blog will cover tech policy, the Wonkblog way

By: Sarah Laskow – July 25, 2013

The *Washington Post* announced on Monday the launch of a new tech policy blog, The Switch, that will cover “NSA surveillance, patent trolls, broadband networks, and much more.” It’s going to be headed up by Tim Lee, who jumped ship from Ars Technica to the *Post* in May and has been writing up until now for Ezra Klein’s Wonkblog. (His posts there have covered not just NSA surveillance and patent trolls, but the anniversary of “Gangnam Style” and solar-powered airplanes.)

Like Klein, Lee took a less-than-traditional path to the *Post*’s newsroom: He worked at the libertarian Cato Institute and earned a master’s degree in computer science before leaving behind academia to start writing for Ars. Joining the *Post* meant that he had to not only end his longstanding relationship with Cato, but also sell his Bitcoins. CJR called him up to talk about his new project and how both the tech policy beat and the *Washington Post* are changing.

Where’d the idea to do this new blog come from?

Ezra had the idea that they wanted to expand their tech policy coverage. They saw Wonkblog as a model that they could expand and franchise on. This will be a site that works the same way editorially. I’ve been learning what their process was like, how to do things the Wonkblog way. The plan the whole time was to spin off the new blog.

There’s a set of websites that do tech really well. But most of them don’t have the depth of policy, and they’re not based in DC. Then you have DC news organizations that cover policy well, but they don’t get tech the way the real tech sites do. The goal is to build a site that is both interesting to the tech world and interesting and valuable and credible to policy professionals, and people on the Hill, and lobbyists. And the *Post* is the ideal place to do that.

How do you cover this beat for the *Post* vs. for a publication like Ars Technica?

I think the big difference is that Ars Technica has a more tech-savvy audience. So we’re going to have to do a little more explaining. We’re not going to be able to assume everyone understands. But that means this site could have a bigger audience. I think there are people who are interested in tech but maybe need a little more explanation.

Then, the three of us are all here in Washington. We’ll be able to break news more quickly and have more insight and understanding for how the policy works.

I have a degree in computer science, and one of the really cool things about Ars—it’s the only publication I know where they’re as likely to lose people to programming jobs as to writing jobs. There’s depth and technical expertise and understanding about sites like Reddit and Hacker News, where nerds hang out. I think I know what people at those

sites look for in a news story that will catch their interest and how to satisfy what they're looking for.

This can be a technical, complicated beat, and some of it revolves around confidentiality and secrecy. As more publications—especially ones that aren't traditionally tech-oriented—start covering this, are journalists getting it right?

I think it depends. There are certain types of stories that it's very difficult to write if you don't have a technical understanding. One that comes to mind is Bitcoin. It seemed like it could be a scam. And it's hard to write about it intelligently if you can't get into the guts of how the network works.

Another is the Stop Online Piracy Act debate. The tech world understood why the DNS [Domain Name System] filtering that was being proposed was something where any computer programmer would say, "That's obviously ridiculous." Without a technical background, it doesn't set off alarms in the same way.

Why has the *Post*, in particular, gotten so interested in tech policy?

It's becoming a bigger and bigger issue. The size of companies like Google and Microsoft and Facebook is growing, and they have huge DC operations. More politics is happening online, too. The *Post* has always had some great tech reporters who mostly write for print. But they've had relatively limited Web focus on tech policy, which is an oversight. This is an effort to fill a hole where there was not as much coverage as there maybe should have been.

You wrote a few years back, when the *Post* fired Dave Weigel, about how as organization it was "almost certainly incapable of nurturing the kind of quirky, bottom-up culture that produces successful bloggers." What's changed?

I think that Ezra Klein has been really influential here. He's really good at his job, and he has a really good understanding of what it takes to make Web journalism work in a large news organization like this. So the fact that he's been here and has been succeeding was important. The culture here does seem hospitable to this kind of journalism. And since he's here, if there are culture clashes, he's there to make sure that the organization makes the support that's needed.

The people who have seen how Wonkblog works and seen how it's succeeded, now they're more open to some of the unorthodox things we do.

Unorthodox things?

A print publication has a strict separation between news and opinion section. We use more of an analytical style. You don't have this thing where the reporter doesn't pretend he doesn't have opinions about things. That makes people nervous on the newspaper side, but because the Web's so crowded you have to do a certain amount of that to get attention. Because Wonkblog has been so successful at building an audience, it's a risk they're willing to take. It's clearly the direction that journalism is going.

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