

Daily Newszine Baby Steps

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Picking a Newsroom

I've been in various kinds of rooms, and heard of other news teams in other circumstances. Summary: you could be set up at one end of a table in Con Ops; you could have a function room shared by Tech Storage (presumably a secure store), or a function room all your own; or a place "on the floor" such as in or behind Information; a hotel room; a suite with a parlor; a suite with a parlor and a jacuzzi.

What works well is often a matter of location. "On the floor" in a large cavernous convention center is going to be loud and noisy. Not everyone can work under those circumstances. (A couple of stereo Walkman-style headphone sets can help out in some cases.) Up in the hotel is probably going to be removed from the action, unless it's on the main route that fans will take all weekend.

In my opinion, you should use a real room with a door, walls, and a regular ceiling; leaving aside the issue of after-hours access, I don't think the convention center floor is the best place to work. But, on the other hand, you should be where people can easily find you. (Near the Con Suite?)

If you can get a couch in your newsroom, do it. Even have someone drag theirs from home... it'll be worth it. (This is where a hotel room or suite has an advantage.) I have seen and heard of enough instances where having a comfortable place to lie down can make a great difference, especially after the first or second day.

Getting back to the issue of access, being where people can find you easily is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they can hand you news updates, and are more likely to come and do so; on the other, it can create a lot of interruptions when you're trying to concentrate. This is why I advocate having someone whose job is to pleasantly intercept anyone who comes through the door. He or she could type in hand-delivered articles, answer questions like "when's the next issue coming out" and have them conclude their business with a smile.

Design Notes

It's an excellent idea to completely design your newsletter before the convention and lay out a mock-up. Practice by typing in the news from last year, and see how it looks. Try different typefaces in your

prototype issue, and see if they're easy to read. I have used Amasis (the periods are too small at 8 pt.) and Oranda (the boldface isn't dark enough at 8 pt.); here I'm using Lucida Fax, which works well on my 300 dpi laser printer

Plan Ahead for Maximum Impact

Plan your gags. If you're going to make a deliberate attempt to have some kind of themed gags in your newszine, plan them out in **brainstorming gag-writing sessions ahead of time.** The *Pteranodon Times* had funny tabloid-style headlines, and also some fictitious "geological eras" for the dates; these were worked out in the months before the convention. We went over all our ideas, and culled them and refined them and edited them down to the ones we felt were the best, and seeded the newszine issue files with them so we wouldn't have to type them in on-site.

In contrast, the *Future History Revisionist* had one running "gag" — the s.f. timeline events — which weren't all that funny, didn't have anything explaining the concept except in issue #1 (and it wasn't printed next to the timeline, or on the same page), and were mostly just my little project. The "tabloid headline" gag concept would have worked at Loscon as they weren't terribly theme-specific at Westercon (except for some of the actual headlines when we worked out a storyline involving an apparently pregnant Pocket Dragon)... but we didn't do it, and the newsletter was duller as a result.

Filler Material For All The Fans. Attempt to stockpile short articles to (1) pad out the page and (2) make the newsletter as a whole more interesting. But while you're doing this, try to make the funny bits of general interest. For example, if you collect fanzines, you might keep an eye out for good linos — but make sure that they translate well, out of context. If a non-fanzine fan wouldn't be amused, assuming you're not at Corflu or Ditto, then don't use it.

The same problem crops up if you're collecting material from apas. Someone might write a terrific follow-up article, but if it requires following the discussion from several previous issues because it's a reply... if the article doesn't survive being uprooted, then don't use it.

Ideas for Worldcons

Worldcon = Wealth of Material. Before Con Francisco, Alan Winston was worried there might not be enough material to fill out each issue of *The Norton Reader*. That proved not to be the case, to put it mildly; we were straining the format trying to print everything we received. There was not enough room to print all of the Program Changes as far as panelists being added and dropped, so we just printed major changes (new room/time, etc.)

Pink Sheets. At a Worldcon-sized convention, try to convince the Programming Dept. that they should issue one-page daily program sheets each morning, so you can stick the silly thing in your pocket. (The updated Friday schedule would be available Friday morning, and so forth.) Most of the changes at these cons will be of the participants-added-and-dropped variety; the bulk of the schedule will be unchanged. Ask for Program Ops to be in charge of the content; they would prepare the day's schedule, with the changed items highlighted (in bold, or with a special symbol, or something). They should be capable of preparing the "camera-ready" masters the night before; the Newsletter dept might take over the burden of printing & distribution, but you won't be able to introduce typos when you go to print it.

If you're using the newszine-board distribution method, you'll want to set aside (N) extra slots for the daily program sheets.

Hugo Awards. The awards shouldn't take you by surprise; by the time the Worldcon opens, the concom should already know exactly what awards are being issued at the con. This means you can prepare a skeleton issue, with all of the Hugos and other categories ready to fill in the blanks. (Conadian had 45 different award categories in their ceremonies, and only 13 or 14 of them were Hugos.) If you're printing commercially, you can run it as a single-sided issue on white stock. (In L.A. it costs 2¢ each or less in quantity.)

Advertisements: Threat or Menace? Donald E. Eastlake 3rd says: *I think the sale of advertising in a daily newsletter is a bad idea for several reasons. Generally newsletter space is at a premium. For smaller ads, the news will get crowded... Is the purpose of the daily newsletter to be a fund raiser for the con or a way to get people the information they need?*

There are no small cons, just small zines.

The first daily newszine I ran myself (and the second one I've worked on), the *Plush Pile*, and the latest, the *Future History Revisionist*, were at the same con in different years. The cons had virtually identical attendance, in the same hotel on the same holiday weekend. The newsletter was distributed the same way, and published on the same schedule.

I've had the possibly-unique experience of working on 5 cons' daily newszines in the span of 15 months. Comparing these two show a world of difference. I had the same size newsroom, I had similar equipment... but now I had the task of managing a large team, i.e. more than 2 people.

The *Future History Revisionist* had three times as much material as the *Plush Pile*. (It had more pages, and smaller print.) Over a 3-day con, four reporters worked 10 hours each, and seven staffers (counting myself) worked from 20 to 60 hours each. Lots of fans submitted news; e.g., five different articles mentioned the Ice Cream Social.

After wrestling (at other cons) with the problem of accounting for volunteers' hours worked, I turned over all office management functions to Colleen Crosby. There were plenty of volunteers willing to type in all the submissions. I just tried to combine everything into a cohesive whole.

But even though "all I have to do is merge it all together in one big issue," it still took **4 hours** to go over each issue and bring it into my style guidelines.

Next time we run a newszine, after I train my regular crew, we'll print up and post style charts. And I'll designate an "editor on duty" who'll see to it that we accumulate a working draft file as we go along.

I think it's possible that **any Worldcon newszine editor** is going to run into some sort of trouble unless they already have a way of effectively managing all the people that show up to work. As Sarah Goodman says: *Learning to manage others doing the job you are used to doing is a whole new cricket game.*



Morning and Evening Newszines

Sarah Goodman suggests that a large newsletter operation might set up two separate crews — putting out two entirely different newsletters. She adds:

*Letting go of control is **always** a difficult issue, especially when you are dealing with an area where at a small con you can do it all yourself; you have no patterns for how to divide the work. I think this is why having two "papers" would work well. The division of labor on each paper is the same as it would be for a smaller venture (or a daily paper).*

I think you would need some design things to stay the same. The typefaces should carry the same weight — X height being the same is probably more important than typeface, the columns and margins should be the same, etc.

... Some WorldCon I'd love to see a double pager with Sunday Funnies!



Taped-Up Notices

Blue Boards. At recent cons, I've supplied a set of 4'x4' hardboard sheets, painted with a light blue semi-gloss paint. (It's the same kind of material that the pegboard flyer-boards & art show walls are made out of, but without the holes.) I position at least one by every newszine board, and anywhere else they seem appropriate. The intent is to encourage taped-up notices to be taped there, instead of to the hotel's walls. Hotels tend to get fussy about that.

At Smofcon, alternatives were brought up. "Foamcore" was mentioned, for its light weight, and it can be folded. (Unfortunately, it breaks; the 4-ft hardboard squares aren't really too heavy, anyway.)

Also, there's "Static Image" or other paper products that come in great big sheets and stick to the walls by static electricity. Fans can tape flyers up, and at the end of the con you just pull down the whole sheet and throw it away. (Unfortunately, some Housekeeping staffers in some regions reflexively tear it down prematurely, so that won't work everywhere!)



Baby Steps: Back Talk

I've received a few comments on what I've written up so far.

Leah Smith (who last ran daily news for the NASFiC in '85 and will **never** do it again), on making publications more interesting (*Baby Steps #2*, "The Great Type-Size Debate"):

I think this is one of the things that got lost in the transition. That is, conventions used to recruit fanzine fans to produce their newszines. Sometimes this resulted in interesting zines with no news about the convention in them (funny bits left in and program changes left out), but the zines were definitely entertaining.

Now con newszines are mainly produced by con runners. They usually have lots of relevant information in them, but they are often produced by people who can't write or who are so fascinated by the mechanics of con running that they are blind to how dull their material is to everyone else.

Ideally you want funny material that's relevant to the convention itself, which precludes preparing it all in advance.

Seth Breidbart, on printing two-sheet issues (*Baby Steps #2*, "Meet Your Budget"):

Better yet, with any size print run, is to print a batch of the first sheet, then a batch of the second; those batches can be stapled while more copies are being run off. This also allows you to get the first bunch of newsletters out earlier.

Failure to apply that sort of thinking is the reason I was, at ConAdian, once again able to have the hoax newsletter scoop the real one with the Hugo Awards.



Your comments solicited — especially if you disagree with me, or don't care for the newszines I've produced.

Some of this material is a result of discussions at Smofcon 12; other comments are based on things that were done better in 1994's *Baycon Bugle*, Orycon 16's *Oryconian*, or Conadian's *Voyageur*. My thanks to Sarah, Kevin, and Jeremy for the examples and additional viewpoints.



Editor: **Chaz Baden**. Role model: **Dave Langford**. Newszine examples: **Jeremy Bloom, Sarah Goodman, Kevin Standlee, Alan Winston**. Additional comments & viewpoints: **Seth Breidbart, Donald E. Eastlake 3rd, Tim Farley, Leah Smith**.

Daily Newszine Baby Steps is a collection of lessons I've learned about running Daily Newsletters at s.f. conventions. Three issues have been published (out of four?) of *Baby Steps*. If you'd like one or all of the issues, send me a SASE. You can get complete sets of back issues from Conozoic/Westercon 47 (*Pteranodon Ptines*), Loscon 21 (*Future History Revisionist*), or Phil & Ed's Excellent Convention (*The Daily Meatball*) — send an address label and \$1 for each set. If you've run a newszine, I'll swap you yours for mine.

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