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Santa Monica-based website encourages debate, thought

By Ashley Archibald

August 08, 2011

DOWNTOWN — Even from the second story of the nine-level office building on Wilshire Boulevard, the staff and leadership of the nonprofit website Procon.org manage to get a 30,000-foot view.

That's the degree of emotional separation that founder Steven C. Markoff was looking for when he established the site, a modern twist on a pre-existing foundation dedicated to taking the passion and rhetoric out of controversial issues and distilling what was left down to bare bones fact.

"People made decisions on facts that weren't facts. It was all emotion," Markoff said.

He had hoped that as he and the people around him aged, they would embrace cool logic and make better, informed choices.

"It didn't have that effect," Markoff said. "If they wanted to do A, it was 'Damn the torpedoes!' Logic and fairness became justifiers."

The Pro/Con Foundation, which became an online presence in 2004 as Procon.org, was Markoff's answer to the increasingly ubiquitous deluge of false or misconstrued information that people are exposed to from all parties looking to score points, be they politicians, organizers or for-profit media outlets.

Most simply, Procon.org can be described as a research project.

It's the work of five, full-time professional researchers that spend their days combing through huge stockpiles of information, picking out salient facts about controversial issues and then rating the quality of the sources used.

The information they find on any of the 42 issues they've taken on so far is organized in columns, simply titled "pro" and "con."

"When you read an article, it might quote three or four people, but it doesn't go past that," said Kambiz Akhavan, president and managing editor of the organization. "Here, you have hundreds of people on both sides of these topics. We've got each pretty well surrounded."

Although the site was established in 2004, the first topic and pro-con analysis produced by Markoff's team was created in 1986.

It grew out of an awkward dinner party, at which Markoff, then in the precious metals and commodities business, was seated next to California Supreme Court Justice Rose Bird.

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"I asked, 'Who's Rose Bird?'" he said, and then set a staffer to creating a one-page report on the justice's policies so that he could get a sense of her politics and also avoid embarrassment.

It was not to be so.

At the time, the public knew Rose Bird as a woman who stood steadfastly against the death penalty. Markoff broached the subject at the event, and received an unexpected response.

"She almost bit me," he said.

The justice retorted that while she was not enamored with the death penalty, she would enforce California's state laws to the utmost.

"But if we're going to kill people," Markoff recalled her saying, "we'll get the documentation right."

After the party, Markoff looked into the matter himself, and found dozens of write-ups on Bird's personal beliefs, none of which appeared to be true.

One supposed expert on the topic told him that Bird was anti-business, and cited a case where she had supposedly torpedoed a business unfairly. A quick check on the case showed how twisted the facts had become — Bird was not even on the bench at the time.

"I was shocked by how many people had strong opinions based on faulty premises or silly information," Markoff said.

Markoff and Maury Weiner, the former chief deputy to then Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, founded a nonprofit organization called the Association of Media Accuracy, and put together a 73-page booklet synthesizing the information that could be found about Bird's actions while on the bench, all organized into pros and cons.

The team then printed off several thousand copies, and sent them out to every sitting justice on the California Supreme Court.

The silence they received in response was deafening.

"Given the political climate at the time, they were afraid to comment," Markoff said.

One booklet became a second on nuclear power, and then a thorough discussion of the debate surrounding medical marijuana. That topic became the first to take advantage of the Internet, in the form of the website Marijuanainfo.org.

In July 2004, these and other topics were moved into the newly-formed nonprofit Procon.org, which has tackled 42 issues that its founder and staff believe cover a wide breadth of the American experience.

Researchers start with a very specific question, and then explore the logical offshoots to flesh-out their understanding of the topic.

For instance, one of the sites concerns concealed handguns.

"The question, 'Should people have guns,' was too broad," Markoff said. "The issue we could handle was concealed handguns."

Each site is the product of thousands of hours of work, and each microsite, the term used to describe the smaller side topics that branch off of the main question, gets at least 300 hours put into it before it launches online.

The strength of the website, and the microsites that house information on specific topics, is also its biggest weakness — the black and white nature of the presentation allows for few, if any, shades of gray.

That was especially present on the site exploring the 2008 presidential election.

Each candidate was asked where they stood on a given issue, and asked to give a yes or no answer, which seemed to challenge many of them, who sought to skirt the question, or qualify it, Akhavan said.

"It's limiting because it's focused, and that's the strength of it," he said.

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site's information in major news outlets leads one to believe that professionals and laymen alike agree.

Congressman Robert Andrews (D-New Jersey) even took the time to read a commendation into the House record.

The representative took interest in Procon.org when the national debate over health care reform took off, said spokeswoman Fran Tagmire.

"At a time when folks on both sides of the health care debate were misinforming the public, the site offered a great summary of the issues that was based in reality rather than myths. It is worthy of recognition because it provides a rational and credible common ground to discuss, and potentially resolve, some of the most important issues facing our county," Tagmire wrote in an e-mail.

Teachers have also taken a shine to the site, which they say helps their students prepare for debates and other research projects.

One anonymous English teacher at Malibu High School, which is in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, said that they use it to spur debate in the class which is themed around health and ethics.

"... so I print out your pro-con pages on topics, have them write about them in their journals, and the next day we debate the topic," the teacher wrote.

That falls right in line with the founder and staff's stated goals — encouraging enlightened, rather than emotional, debate.

Although improving understanding and changing minds would be the gold standard for the effort, Markoff is willing to settle for just getting people to think in broader terms about the convictions they hold, and why they hold them.

"If I can say that, we win," he said.

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