

# Chris Nolan

*Chris Nolan of Spot-On.com has worked in her share of newsrooms on both coasts.*

*While many in the news business are left scratching their heads and wringing their hands over loss of readers and revenue, this self-described 'stand-alone journalist' is excited about the future of news. We'll let her tell you why.*

**1 Q: More than a year ago, Jay Rosen (New York University professor of new media) invited you to write about being a "stand-alone journalist." What is your definition of a "stand-alone journalist"? Why not use the term freelance?**

The idea behind a stand-alone journalist is that you are not affiliated with any one news association. It's someone who is working on the Web, using time-tested editorial metrics to do their job to produce professional, quality editorial. Stand-alone journalists mostly consist of former newsroom journalists.

Spot-On's writers all have some kind of professional news experience. I edit them, but they are not struggling to be heard. They understand professionalism and consequences of not doing the job. Basically, they know what editors are looking for. Freelance implies you're working with a larger organization or else it's used to denote people who are between jobs.

**2 Q: As you mentioned, we're no longer hampered by place in terms of doing our jobs. How has your newsroom and independent experience combined to lead you to where you are today?**

Everyone in the newspaper business struggles with new media. The blog is simply a tool; it's a piece of software that allows you to write and publish on the Web. It's not so different from what goes on in newsrooms. We're able to research stories on the Web, write them and e-mail them to others.

That Web-based experience has gone on and fueled what we are able to do at Spot-On. I wanted a way to stand apart from the large crowd of folks placing emphasis only on the technology by using this to do the work I've always done.

**3 Q: Describe your journalism experience.**

I have no idea how to do anything else other than journalism. My first newspaper job was when I was 16 or 17 at The Daily Banner in Cambridge, Md. I think local reporting is such an invaluable experience. I worked at the statehouse in Delaware (and) at

the Tampa Tribune and kicked around the East Coast at various papers.

I moved to Washington, D.C., in the early '90s and began working at a series of television trade magazines. I covered congressional commerce and judiciary committees. In the process of doing that I was asked to start writing about technology, and I came out to Silicon Valley. I went to work for the San Jose Mercury News for a while and later wrote a tech column called "Talk Is Cheap" for the New York Post. By early 2001 — the nuclear winter of technology — I stopped covering tech. Frankly I goofed off.

I really was freelancing then. A local group asked me to help with newsletters, and I suggested a Web log instead. Nick Denton (founder of Gawker Media) had shown me the first blogging software back in 2001. So I threw up the site (Politics From Left to Right) and used it as a way to explore the technology, which I thought was important for someone in the news business to understand.

**4 Q: At what point did you think your blogging would become a business?**

When (San Francisco Mayor) Gavin Newsom allowed same-sex couples to wed, the traffic on the site tripled overnight. After that I thought, maybe this is a business. We raised money and closed the first round of fundraising one year ago. We're now in the second round, and it's as hard as everyone tells you it is.

Politics From Left to Right was based at my Web site ([www.ChrisNolan.com](http://www.ChrisNolan.com)). We were playing with Movable Type and didn't have style sheets or anything. I was just interested in how the technology worked.

The original blog and my Web site were folded into [www.Spot-On.com](http://www.Spot-On.com) a year ago, and that's when I started to aggressively recruit writers. The idea was to provide small- to medium-sized papers with diverse content and voices.

I have nine writers today all over the world ... writing about



Photo by Doc Searls

many different topics from politics to sardonic views on raising teenagers.

**Q: How do you select writers to work for Spot-On?**

I read a lot of stuff on the Web. I'm looking for writers who have a clear idea of what they want to say. I want smart, good writers who are ready to slot into any other media that's out there. When I read their stuff, I want to say, "Cool. I hadn't thought of that." The nice thing for writers is that they don't have to sit and wait and pitch. I offer the content to news organizations with the motto, "We're from the Internet, and this time we're here to help." We're creating ways to reach the reader that they haven't been reaching.

**Q: So what's been the response of news organizations?**

We're at the end of another terrible year in the news business. At Spot-On we've spent the past year developing a first-rate editorial product with diverse voices. Our writers are reasonable, responsible and reliable. They produce every week. I think of this as a revitalization of news, and I'm excited at the opportunity. Editors can look at our work and say, "This person is interesting and has a nice voice, let's try it for few weeks and see if it works."

**Q: Is Spot-On profitable?**

We're a classic editorial startup — we are not profitable, but we are privately held, and that's all I'm going to say. We made the decision not to compete with our clients for ad dollars. The future is in syndication.

We came along at a time when readers wanted more information, and we were able to provide it. Markos Moulitsas (Daily Kos) and Redstate are hard-core political activist sites. Josh Marshall (Talking Points Memo) is very much in the news busi-

ness, but he belongs to a long tradition of news activism. Glenn Reynolds (Instapundit) is a spokesperson for the Web. I'm doing something different by using everything I've learned in 20-plus years as a journalist and producing a quality product so people in newsrooms will say, "I want that."

**Q: Where has the news business gone wrong with the Web, and how can it make up for lost time?**

For an industry of people who thrive on delivering the message of change, we don't embrace it well ourselves. I think a lot of people have faith in the business and how it will go forward. Others are not able to envision the future, and that's gut wrenching. Either way, it's time for the whining to come down to a dull roar.

The news business made a lot of mistakes, and a lot of that is because they did not have a competitive environment in which to work. Blogs are a new competitive environment, and that's great because the competition makes us all better.

I agree with many people that much of what is out there (on the Internet) is junk. But much of what is out there is really interesting stuff — compelling and smartly done. It just needs some editing. I don't have to gather writers in a newsroom to let them follow their bliss. The future news business is more creative voices.

**Q: What are the challenges to running a start-up?**

It's no walk on the beach. But we're starting to see people placing work. Traffic on the site is good, and big sites are talking about us. It's a lot of fun to work with writers. We're not a big family cracking wise all the time like you have in a newsroom environment, but it's a lot of fun. Like it or not, blogging has become a source of information for people. Daily newspapers are filled with wire copy and a lot of voices from on high. But when you go to Web there's all these people raising their voices.

The disenfranchised are always the first to come on board. Then it morphs into something more useful. It's moving slowly, but it's happening.

**Q: How would you advise seasoned journalists to become more familiar with technology and the way people get their information? And how would you suggest journalists of the future maximize their natural gift with technology in a reporting career?**

Start by reading their own online Web pages. Many newspaper Web pages are unattractive and difficult to use, but the Examiner folks have been constantly tweaking their site and making it more attractive. Some of coolest sites are from magazines. Vanity Fair is brilliant and really well done.

The second thing is to look at your kids. They're not reading newspapers, but they are reading. Look at and learn from how they use cell phones and text messaging. Kids are not going to grow out of it; they take it for granted. The ability to collect and gather news is dispersed, and I can't articulate that any more clearly.

... News has gotten into this situation because at a technology-driven movement we placed the emphasis on technology (think: DIGG, YouTube, Blogger, etc). These are pieces of software no different than Word or Excel or Outlook. They can be moved, shaped and manipulated to suit your particular needs. When you place emphasis on technology, the message gets lost. ...Don't spend a lot of time mastering specific technology because it will continue to change. The emphasis must be on basic reporting and writing.