

Dolph Simons, Jr. – Lawrence Journal-World - 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The newspaper. The television. These are two different and competitive forms of communication in our modern society. Can the two ever get along? Today we'll learn about an innovative newspaper publisher who chose to launch a local cable television system. He got them to work together, and he continues to seek innovative approaches to communicating with the public. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Dolph Simons Jr., Chairman and Editor of the World Company which publishes the Lawrence Journal-World and other newspapers. He is a long-time newspaperman, but he has been innovative in other forms of communication as well.

In 1968, Dolph was attending a meeting in New York where he heard people talking about a new phenomenon called cable television. When Dolph came back home, he told his father – who was editor of the paper at the time - that this was something that they should pursue in Lawrence.

“I had a dad who was very supportive,” Dolph said. “My father had worked for his father, and he gave me every opportunity.” He encouraged Dolph to look into the idea.

Dolph brought in a national cable television expert from Denver in hopes of partnering with him in setting up a cable system in Lawrence, but the cable expert was skeptical about having a successful system so close to Kansas City. “I don’t think we can make it go,” he said. After he left, Dolph told his father, “I still think we should give it a try.”

In 1968, the company applied for a cable television franchise for Lawrence. In December 1970, the new cable system went on the air. “I promised the city we would give Lawrence the best cable system of any city our size,” Dolph said.

The cable system went on to grow and succeed, producing numerous award-winning programs through the years. Dolph found a way to make the two forms of media work together, such as by referring television viewers to the newspaper for more detailed information.

By the 1990s, yet another alternate form of communication was on the scene: The Internet. The Lawrence Journal-World set out to create an online presence on the world wide web.

The Journal-World has now become one of the most technically advanced newspapers in the nation. In 1995, the Lawrence Journal-World became one of the first newspapers in the world to launch a daily updated news site online. In 2003, the Journal-World was the only newspaper in the country to be a national finalist in every category in the Newspaper Association of America's online awards.

“I have two sons in the business and they are very savvy on the new technology,” Dolph said. He proudly points out that his two daughters have been in the newspaper and cable business as well.

Interestingly, the Journal-World has invested in the weekly newspapers in neighboring communities around Lawrence in recent years. This includes rural communities such as Baldwin, Tonganoxie, and Basehor, population 2,324 people. Now, that’s rural.

Is there a place for weekly newspapers in the modern era? “Very definitely,” Dolph said. “There’s always a place for that good newspaper that cares genuinely about making the community better.”

That reflects his philosophy about the Journal-World itself. “My dad said, if you take care of Lawrence, Lawrence will take care of you,” Dolph said.

Dolph strives to remain true to the classic values of journalism while exploring new technologies.

"I think Dolph's passion for the communities reached by his newspapers and their online news sites is remarkable," said Gloria Freeland, director of the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media. "Dolph and his family continue to explore new technologies, but their love for journalism and their communities is unchanging."

Among many other honors, he has been named a juror for the Pulitzer Prize and a Pioneer of the cable television industry. Wow.

The newspaper. The television. Can the two get along? Dolph Simons Jr. found a way for the two to work together. We salute the Simons family and all those involved with the World Company for making a difference with their innovation in journalism – both in print and on-screen.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.