

Great Expectations

An Investigative News Network is born. Now what?

CALL IT THE POCANTICO DECLARATION. BACK ON JULY 1, THE LEADERS OF twenty muckraking nonprofit news organizations concluded a three-day meeting and produced a document that ended with this proud, hopeful sentence: "We have hereby established, for the first time ever, an Investigative News Network of nonprofit news publishers throughout the United States of America."

That final sentence meant different things to different people who were in the room, at the Pocantico Conference Center at the John D. Rockefeller estate outside New York City, let alone to the rest of the journalism world that was not. Nonetheless, it raised great expectations about what a network like this might be able to ultimately accomplish.

Administrative, editorial, and financial collaboration is the overall, explicit goal of the group. But to me and others, the most exciting potential of the Pocantico Declaration is the prospect of organizing the best investigative-reporting output and talent of member news organizations. That has never happened. Properly structured and led, the Investigative News Network could become *the* online destination for original investigative reporting.

Full disclosure: I was not just a participant at Pocantico, but a member of the conference steering committee along with the principal organizers, Bill Buzenberg, the executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, and Robert Rosenthal, the executive director of the Center for Investigative Reporting, and the conference moderator, Brant Houston, the Knight Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois. As the original draftsman of the Pocantico Declaration before it was collectively debated and edited, who on the afternoon of June 30 also formally proposed to the group the name and the concept of an "Investigative News Network," I am obviously not objective about what transpired or what lies ahead.

Still, two dynamics reinforce this vision, in my view. First, the number of Investigative News Network member organizations—and thus the subject range, sheer volume, and potential public impact of available content—will increase substantially over the ensuing months, just as the member stations and programming content of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) hugely increased after those national nonprofit networks were first established in 1970. (Because of space and lodging limitations at Pocantico, a stunning venue made available by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a number of publishers of quality investigative reportage could not be invited.) Second, the network will inevitably become international, as numerous nonprofit news organizations exist around the world, many of them producing outstanding journalism.

Pocantico brought together an abundance of heavyweight journalistic, entrepreneurial, and management talent around a large, room-size table, including Sheila Coronel, the director of the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University's journalism school and the founding executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism; Brian Duffy, the director of investigation and enterprise reporting for NPR and former editor of *U.S. News & World Report*; Margaret Freivogel, the founder and editor of the *St. Louis Beacon* and a veteran reporter and editor for *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; Florence Graves, the founding director of the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University and the founding editor of *Common Cause Magazine*; Lorie Hearn, the founding editor of the new Watchdog Institute (see page 12), an investigative outlet in San Diego that will have a relationship with *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, where she spent a quarter century; Mark Horvit, the executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE); and Joel Kramer, the founding editor and CEO of MinnPost.com and former executive editor and publisher of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

Not long ago, nonprofit investigative-journalism organizations were regarded as novelties, capable of high-quality reporting but supported by philanthropic contributions rather than advertising, which was considered, among other things, unsustainable. Yet amid the carnage in commercial newsrooms, which has cost thousands of talented writers and editors their jobs in recent years, the number of nonprofit news organizations, and outstanding journalists working for them, has notably increased.

So too has the funding: At least 180 U.S. foundations have spent nearly \$128 million since 2005 on news and information projects, and half of that has been for investigative reporting by nonprofit centers, according to a recent report ("New Media Makers") by Jan Schaffer, the executive director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism. And those numbers do not include the massive foundation and individual funding given annually to public broadcasting.

All of this doesn't make up for what's been lost, certainly, but the dramatic de-

cline of commercial newspapers and the expansion of nonprofit journalism are obviously related. Roughly two-thirds of the nonprofit news organizations represented at Pocantico began because the commercial milieu for serious journalism had become, shall we say, professionally inhospitable. And half of the organizations at Pocantico began within the past three years.

An investigative-journalism ecosystem is emerging in which an increasing percentage of the most ambitious reporting projects will emanate from the public realm, not from private commercial outlets. That is a tectonic shift. Meanwhile, attitudes in the traditional media world are changing in significant ways, as indicated in recent decisions by two of its most venerable institutions. First, the Pulitzer Prize board in December 2008 announced that for the first time since their inception in 1917, Pulitzers may be awarded to news organizations that publish only on the Internet and which are “primarily dedicated to original news reporting and coverage of ongoing stories”; and that “adhere to the highest journalistic principles.”

Six months later, in June 2009, at the IRE national conference in Baltimore, The Associated Press announced that the nonprofit cooperative will make investigative stories from four nonprofit news organizations—the Center for Investigative Reporting, the Center for Public Integrity, the Investigative Reporting Workshop, and ProPublica—available to its member newspapers.

THESE DEVELOPMENTS WERE FRESH in all of our minds at Pocantico, providing buzz and momentum and reminding us that we were part of something larger than our individual projects. Many of those present had first felt the buzz two weeks earlier at the IRE conference. While the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) couldn't muster enough money or people for its annual meeting in a recession year, IRE had more than eight hundred attendees and optimism and excitement filled the air. And IRE, thanks to the Knight Foundation, organized a special, eleven-hour-long meeting of the nonprofit investigative-reporting centers. There was heady talk by some of a “movement,” and

maybe these atmospherics help explain why the strong personalities and egos of those assembled at Pocantico were remarkably restrained throughout the three-day meeting.

However, there were—and remain—some fundamental tensions between the priorities of the various participants. The newer startup publishers are understandably most worried about their economic viability. They want to establish administrative, legal, fundraising, and other new systems. Their forcefully articulated and continuing concern is that the investigative network could become a behemoth that siphons donor dollars away from state and local publishers and pushes their daily logistical concerns into the background. The older institutions, meanwhile, are necessarily interested in exchanging information and establishing greater “back office” ad-

An online brand for the world's best investigative journalism?

ministrative and financial collaboration between the groups. But they were also strongly motivated by the promise of joint editorial projects across the nation, and of increasing the power, brand, and earned revenue potential of shared investigative content. To the larger, more established operations, the new network would bolster the individual financial potential of the enterprise and its member organizations, not diminish them.

Sometimes the divergent positions at Pocantico felt like the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and there was even a little joking about that between sessions. But we had just seventy-two hours, and somehow we arrived at what I believe will prove to be a historic agreement. That said, any vision must also be implemented. And the extent to which the network will be able to grow editorially, and to contract original reporting from respected freelance investigative

journalists—all on the way to becoming the online brand for anthologized and original investigative reporting—may be constricted by the more immediate exigencies facing the newer, smaller member organizations. The network's leadership and governing structure is key to overcoming this challenge.

None of us harbors any illusions about the grubby logistics of building a new institution. The staff sizes, annual budgets, and editorial capacities of the various nonprofit publishers in the U.S. vary widely, as does, frankly, the quality and quantity of their work and the actual extent to which they do investigative reporting. Newsgathering practices and standards of some sort must be established, a thankless job that the membership committee, chaired by Brant Houston, is handling.

Scott Lewis, the co-founder and CEO of Voice of San Diego, is the chairman of the sustainability subcommittee, which is conducting a basic assessment of member organizations' needs and capabilities. What are the best practices and shared strategies for fundraising, generating earned revenue, human resources, IT, general and liability insurance, corporate governance, etc.? I chair the content dissemination subcommittee, which includes an assessment of platforms, technologies, corporate and legal structures, and potential editorial collaborations. Bill Buzenberg is, among other things, spearheading the effort to obtain planning grants from a few foundations to support these activities over the next six to twelve months. The Center for Public Integrity is serving, as it did for the Pocantico conference, as the temporary fiscal agent for this burgeoning network until a 501 (c)(3) tax-exempt organization is formed.

With the new Investigative News Network, we will have, at the least, the first broad-based, nonprofit news publishers association, its members collaborating administratively, editorially, and financially. At the most, well, use your imagination. **CJR**

CHARLES LEWIS, who founded the Center for Public Integrity, is the founding executive editor of the Investigative Reporting Workshop at the American University School of Communication in Washington. He is a contributing editor to *CJR*.