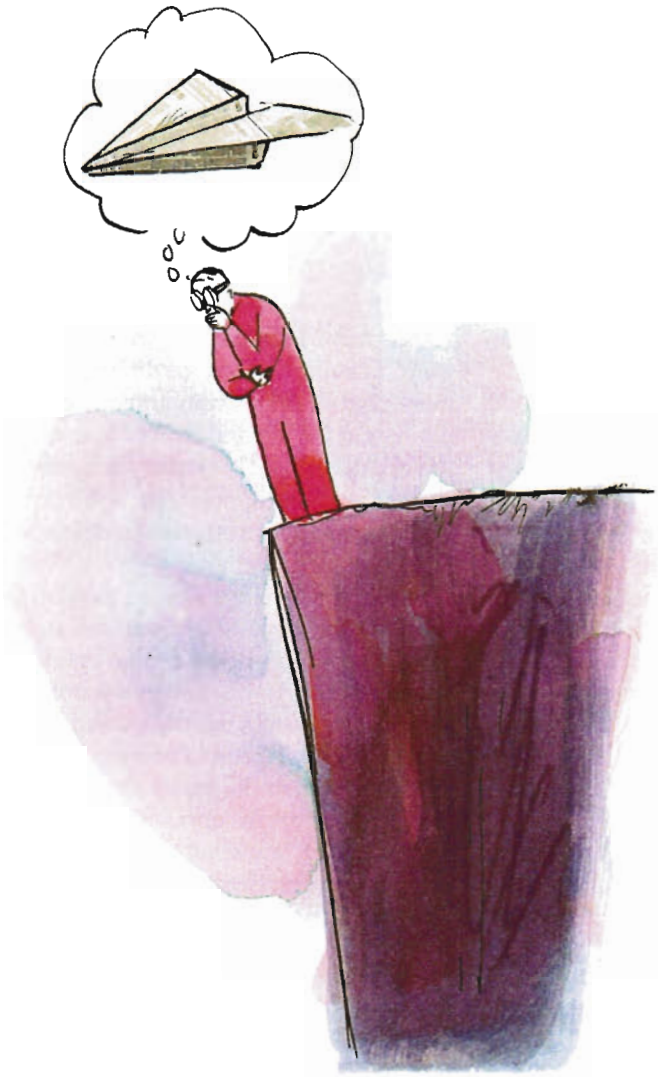

2014
How We Got Here

Voices from an imagined future

These are hard times. CJR counts a stunning 11,250 journalism jobs lost, mostly at newspapers, in the last two years. Out of necessity, these are times of great innovation, too, both inside and outside of media companies. Will somebody come up with a replicable way (or ways) to support serious reporting in a digital age? We don't know. We do know there are people willing to gamble on their ideas, and that's likely what it will take. Here are eight of them. We asked each to present his or her vision as if it were the spring of 2014, as a way to expand the conversation about how we all might get there.

A Social-Network Solution

How investigative reporting got back on its feet

BY CHARLES LEWIS

WASHINGTON, D.C., 2014—It didn't seem possible.

Who would have thought, amid the newsroom devastation of the first decade of the twenty-first century, that investigative reporting would find a way to not just survive, but flourish, in an improbable, highly innovative new golden age?

Things had never looked bleaker financially than in 2008, when Gannett and McClatchy alone cut 5,500 newspaper jobs. Overall, according to an *Advertising Age* analysis of federal employment data, between 2000 and 2008, media industries lost more than 200,000 jobs. And no media sector was harder hit than newspaper and magazine publishing.

The most substantive public-service journalism in American history had been initiated and published by the nation's newspapers. So the specific impact of this newsroom carnage on investigative reporting—one of the most expensive and difficult genres of journalism—had been dire. Numerous Pulitzer-caliber investigative reporters throughout the nation lost their jobs, and entire "I-teams" at newspapers and television stations were shut down.

This loss of investigative power could not have come at a worse time, with the country facing the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression, and with a global landscape becoming increasingly complex and treacherous in so many ways. In the incipient digital age, disparate information and wide-ranging points of view abounded, but serious, thorough, independent *newsgathering* did not. This gutting of newsrooms had been occurring not just in the U.S. and Canada but throughout the world. And it became painfully obvious that there was a diaspora of hundreds upon hundreds of talented investigative reporters and editors with nowhere to work.

Both journalism and democracy desperately needed new economic models to support and deliver investigative reporting, as well as a place to explore and incubate new platforms and approaches. And that is precisely why in late 2007, I proposed the creation of the Investigative Reporting Workshop, as a project of the American University School of Communication in Washington, D.C. By the spring of 2009, the workshop, to be funded by the university and by philanthropic foundations and individuals, was approved and staffed and had begun publishing original, online, multimedia investigative stories, prepared by veteran journalists working closely with students.

It was and remains an attempt to enlarge the public space for this kind of crucial work, but it was only the beginning. The mission for the workshop included a research effort—to explore new models for supporting investigative journalism beyond individual, independent reporting centers. For more than two years, I consulted and mulled with media thinkers. I began to conceive of a global investigative news service—a network of preeminent journalists and major news organizations that would chronicle the uses and abuses of power.

For me, the idea had an intellectual firmament and provenance dating back to at least 1992. After eleven years at ABC News and then *60 Minutes*, I quit, and in 1989 founded a nonprofit, investigative-reporting organization called the Center for Public Integrity, which I led for its first fifteen years. In late 1992, Victor Navasky, then the editor of *The Nation* (and now chairman of this magazine), invited me to speak at an international investigative-journalism conference in, of all places, Moscow, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In attendance were reporters from around the world, laboring under vastly different conditions and cultural mores, but all deeply committed to exposing the truth. The drama and the life-and-death dimension of this experience struck a deep chord in me that resonates to this day. I realized there was a huge opportunity, and a public need, to extend internationally the methodical modus operandi of the Center for Public Integrity.

It took me five long years to develop the concept, and in late 1997, the center's International Consortium of Investigative Journalists began formal operation. It was the first working network—one hundred people in fifty countries—of some of the world's most respected investigative reporters developing stories across borders.

Consortium stories exposed such issues as illegal cigarette-smuggling by the major manufacturers, the privatization of water, and U.S. war contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan (that one won the first George Polk Award for Internet reporting in 2004). Structurally, though, the consortium had never been robustly funded and its important projects were so epic, intricate, and expensive that it was difficult to do more than one or two a year.

Nonetheless, nonprofit initiatives such as this enabled high-quality journalism that otherwise wouldn't have been possible, and by 2008, nonprofit publishers of investigative reporting throughout the U.S. were raising and spending at least $20 million annually—an unprecedented development in U.S. history that reflected the vacuum created by old commercial media's abrogation of this work. But this was nothing compared to what emerged in the ensuing five years: dozens of new nonprofit muckraking organizations at the local, state, and national level were able to obtain funding and begin publishing important work. Suddenly, $20 million raised and spent annually became $40 million, in the U.S. alone. Around the world, meanwhile, dozens of investigative journalism training organizations, such as Investigative Reporters and Editors in the U.S., continued to grow.

This extraordinary investigative connectivity and ferment were auspicious, and continue to spawn new energy and creativity today. The missing elements, though, were a global, online, social-utility platform, in which the best investigative journalists in the world could publish their original work, and

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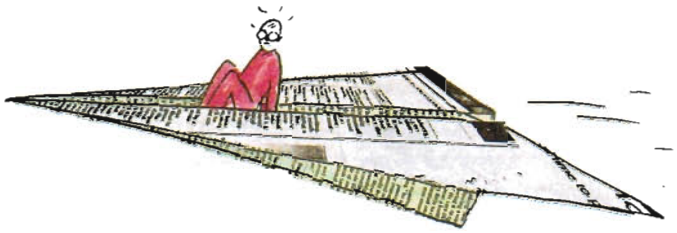


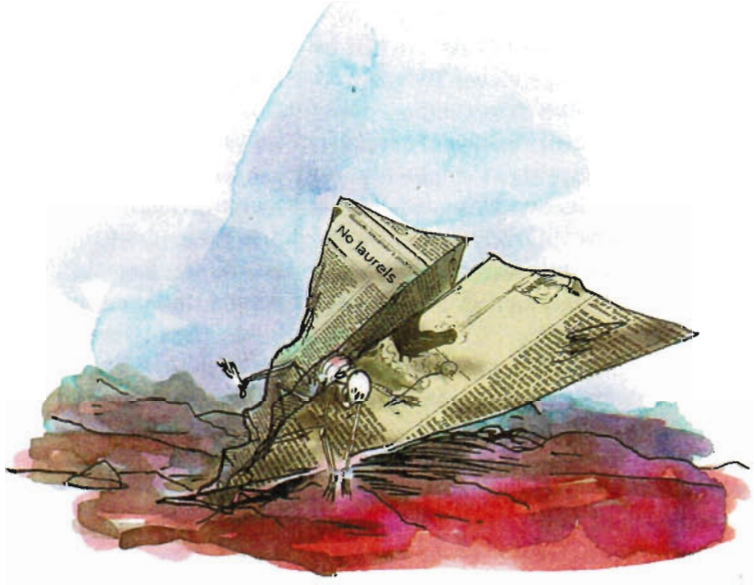
a new financial support system to make that possible. The looming question gnawing away at me was: How to create an economic model that would achieve much greater editorial output annually, with a much larger and sustained audience, via publishing partnerships and the Web? For that, a new entity was clearly needed.

One of the most encouraging developments around this time was the late-2008 launch by Politico of a new content- and revenue-sharing network, in which more than one hundred clients, including sixty-seven newspapers, were signed up in just three months. Clients of the new Politico Network also got access to Reuters news stories, which helped the London-based company achieve greater market penetration in the U.S. Separately, CNN began its own wire service to tap into The Associated Press's restless newspaper-client base. After all the newsroom devastation, by late 2008, many individual newspapers and TV stations had begun to realize that they couldn't function without some basic national reporting content—but they needed it without having to shoulder the related overhead. Did that also mean there might be a public yearning for investigative reporting, both here and around the world? Thankfully, we now know, it did.

As Richard Gingras, who has helped to start many new media ventures, including Salon, and who was at the time a senior adviser on various product initiatives at Google, sagely pointed out when we first began to discuss how to make such a thing happen: old-model investigative journalism was typically subsidized by other, less-expensive types of news content—wires, sports, lifestyle content in newspapers, or interviews on *60 Minutes*. The new model was going to require not only multiple revenue streams, but some rethinking on the cost side as well. At the same time, it also was not clear to me if the U.S. philanthropic community had the interest or the capacity to support a much more costly international venture.

WITH ALL OF THIS IN MIND, IN LATE 2009, I BEGAN WORLD Investigative Reporting Enterprises (WIRE), a global gateway to investigative journalism—a multimedia platform for the best original stories by some of the best journalists in the world, commissioned by, reported, written, edited, and published or produced for WIRE. The privately owned company includes investors who are socially committed to this work and who don't expect 20-plus percent annual profits—people I know personally and trust.

As much as possible, WIRE coverage has illuminated macro, not micro, patterns about power. The point of view reflects a global, not local, perspective. After all, this was the first global muckraking portal, and therefore it should *not* be U.S.-centric in tone or outlook, despite the physical location of the core staff in Washington. By the end of 2013, we were publishing in Spanish, French, Chinese, and Arabic, as well as English.



WIRE stories include video, audio, text, graphics, and searchable databases. We recognized that rapidly evolving digital technologies required a rethinking of the form and structure of journalistic work. To respond to more frenetic behaviors in news consumption, we created a layered pyramid of content, from a narrative overview to breaking updates, from video reports to databases of background detail, from maps and satellite imagery to illuminating charts and graphs. You could say we were applying the long-tail theory to journalism, which, as Gingras noted, "allowed us to create living resources that continue to change well beyond our initial publication dates, letting us include additional postings by our own reporters, rebuttals and corrections by our readers, and secondary analysis by interested experts and third parties."

By the end of 2011, WIRE had a full-time staff of twenty. Additionally, we had five consulting regional editors and 150 premier investigative journalists from seventy-five countries, each paid a respectable, annual contributing writer fee plus a potential revenue share of annual profits. In its first full year of operation, 2010, WIRE lost money, as we expected. By 2011, however, it turned a 2.6 percent annual profit, and by the end of 2013 profits were at 5 percent. By then, we had accumulated one thousand media partners throughout the world, using a syndication model in which content is exchanged for online page views, which WIRE then uses to sell advertising—with a share of that advertising income paid back to the partner site. Revenue is derived from advertising and reader donations. The latter has vastly exceeded our expectations. Thousands of civic-minded individuals became so excited by the historic nature of WIRE and the public service it provides that they became reader-contributors, what we call WIRE Associates—crowd-funding by credit card, not for an individual project or subject area, but for the entire operation.

When WIRE officially launched, the central question in the news business was whether online ad revenue would ever be sufficient to sustain serious reporting. But by 2012—boosted by President Obama's national Broadband Initiative—broadband access in America had increased by a remarkable 40 percent, which, of course, energized advertisers.

But before we could take advantage of that, we had to figure out how WIRE would drive page views. We realized that a reconsideration of how the Web drives audience was in order. It wasn't any longer about the "instance" of readership or viewing in the old-media model, but the "persistence" of availability and search-engine access. This is where the creation of our "living resources" investigative material began to bear fruit. It supported better search-engine rankings and stimulated new forms of interaction. It generated visits long after the original publication of a given article, visits that resulted not only in greater consumption, but also further discussion, collaboration, and contribution. It gave readers a sense of ownership, a stake in the work we were producing.

Another epiphany for me was recognizing that most investigative reporting falls into specialized subjects or themes—corruption, human rights, energy and the environment, international security, health and safety, etc. Each of those subject areas is of interest to vast, worldwide social networks of reasonably well-educated and well-informed people—cumulatively, tens of millions of people. Until the creation of WIRE, none of those communities had access to such high-quality, anthologized information. Now these vast networks became both specialized markets for the work of WIRE's international cadre of reporters—exponentially increasing WIRE's Web traffic—and pathways to new information resources, crowdsourced experts, and potential citizen muckrakers.

This social-network strategy actually became more feasible in 2010 when we launched, within WIRE, the Global Reporting and Investigative Track, a searchable aggregation of the most recent, credible investigative journalism from around the world, as well as the significant public government and nongovernmental investigative findings—congressional and corporate reports, studies by NGOs, etc. It's collected using computer technologies, and by enlisting thousands of knowledgeable, concerned people in the various social networks we've partnered with on six continents to help us construct a free, searchable, ever-expanding archive. This living database, in addition to the original investigative reporting by WIRE, has proven to be immensely appealing to people around the world, and has helped to vastly enlarge the audience and appetite for quality investigative journalism.

A. J. Liebling famously said, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." While unable to duplicate the 100 percent employee ownership offered by David Lawrence to his journalists at the Bureau of National Affairs more than sixty years ago, WIRE has redefined and markedly improved the economic reality and future prospects for investigative reporters and their crucial work. More to the point, it has provided a global platform for exposing the most significant public and private abuses of power in the world.

It didn't seem possible.

Old Hands, New Voice

How NGOs learned to do news

BY CARROLL BOGERT

NEW YORK, 2014—Back in 2009, the future of international reporting looked bleak indeed. Several big U.S. newspapers had shut down their foreign bureaus altogether. The American TV networks had basically shrunk their international presence to London. Covering the Iraq war had nearly bankrupted foreign-news budgets, and by then, the American public had lost interest in the Iraq war. Or indeed in foreign news at all, a lot of the time. It was tough being the most expensive and least read story in the queue. Like a faded diva in a ratty mink stole ("Oh, this old thing? I bought it on

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