



Showcase

The future of watchdog reporting brightens as nonprofit groups organize a new network
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Charles Lewis, a longtime innovator in investigative reporting, describes what he calls “a seismic event in the annals of American journalism”—the formation of the new Investigative News Network.

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The idea of muckrakers meeting to create a new Investigative News Network at John D. Rockefeller’s majestic estate is ironic. There was, of course, no visible sign of Ida Tarbell there, such as her 800-page classic book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, which helped to set the stage for the 1911 Supreme Court antitrust decision breaking up his massive corporation.

But her fierce, independent spirit was nonetheless felt there these past days by this participant.

And as a matter of fact, let the record show that we actually met in the estate’s [Coach Barn](#), which the Rockefeller Brothers Fund years ago converted into the [Pocantico Conference Center](#) and generously provided to us. Representatives of nearly two dozen nonprofit news organizations – most of them the actual founders – came there from throughout the United States June 29th -July 1st with the express purpose of doing something significant and unprecedented.

Indeed, the actual name of the conference before anyone arrived was “[Building an Investigative News Network](#).” The co-organizers were Bill Buzenberg, executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, and Robert Rosenthal, executive director of the Center for Investigative Reporting, with Brant Houston, Knight Chair professor at the University of Illinois and yours truly rounding out the de facto conference “steering committee.”

Against the backdrop of the incredible shrinking newsroom carnage of recent years and the related, simultaneous sprouting up of numerous, new nonprofit investigative reporting organizations, for many months now there has been a natural coalescing of energies and ideas between the oldest and newest publishers. And those interactions and simpatico needs and collective vision of the “possible” culminated in the decision to form a new, synchronous mechanism. For a more detailed recounting of how we all got to this figurative place, see “[An Emerging Investigative News Network](#),” written and published by the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University on the eve of the conference and its “Pocantico Declaration” released afterwards.

As the original draftsman of the Declaration before it was collectively edited, who also first put forward the name “Investigative News Network,” I am hardly objective about what has just transpired. At the same time, there are absolutely no illusions about the formidable administrative, editorial and financial work now to be done. The number, staff size, annual budget and editorial capacity of investigative news publishers in the U.S. varies widely, as does the quality and quantity of their work – all of which underscores the need for basic, institutional transparency and common newsgathering standards and “best practices.” Once those criteria are established by the 11-person Network Steering Committee, you can expect that in the weeks and months ahead, the number of member investigative publishers will substantially increase.

The Network must assist the newest nonprofits achieve greater economic stability and public presence, while at the same time, developing new models to monetize the shared, combined content of the member organizations. The fiscal agent for the Pocantico conference was the Center for Public Integrity, and so it will be for the Network in this interim period, at the direction of the Committee, obtaining planning and collaborative, editorial grants in the months ahead.

As indicated in the Declaration, the Committee is the interim governing body for the Network until a new nonprofit corporation is formed for this purpose with its own Board of Directors.

But we must take a moment, on Independence Day weekend, to look beyond the grubby logistics of “to do” list deliverables necessary to create a new institution. The birth of the Investigative News Network, with its boundless potential on so many levels, is a seismic event in the annals of American journalism. Never before has anyone attempted to organize the best investigative reporting output and energies of respected news organizations and their journalists, making that original “accountability” information infinitely more accessible to the public in multiple ways in the new media landscape. On Planet Earth, this is still a very human, vitally necessary, qualitative function, editorial judgment beyond mere algorithm aggregation and automation.

The allure of a central, online place to read, hear and see anthologized, original, investigative journalism content is incredibly powerful. And at the very least, amidst the current crisis in commercial journalism, the Investigative News Network offers the promise of some clarity and coherence to the wildly evolving, nonprofit investigative reporting ecosystem.

Stay tuned!



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