

# Nonprofit Newsrooms Provide Outlet for Journalists

Last year more than 20 nonprofit journalism organizations gathered in New York and issued a declaration of purpose and formed a network to share resources, stories and business ideas.

It was a moment symbolizing an extraordinary moment in U.S. journalism – a moment in which it was recognized that nonprofit newsrooms are here to stay and will be a major factor in preserving and improving watchdog and community journalism.

Over the past three years the number of nonprofit newsrooms in the U.S. has skyrocketed as advertising dollars plummeted, news coverage shrunk and newspapers laid off thousands of journalists.

But experienced reporters decided they were not done and beginning journalists were eager to create something new. They were ready to replace the pessimism in the mainstream media with experimentation, risk and optimism.

The result has been an array of organizations that vary in size, coverage, budget and structure. Some nonprofits have begun with only two people and no funding. Some are two or more decades old with staffs of 20 or more and budgets of \$5 million to \$10 million. Some cover national and international issues and some cover a city.

They also vary in independence. There are nonprofit organizations that are independent 501(c) 3 charitable organizations that stand alone such as MinnPost.com, the Texas Tribune or the Voice of San Diego.

Others are 501 (c) 3 organizations that have agreements with

public universities and are actually housed at universities. Among those is the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Wisconsin and the Watchdog Institute at San Diego State University.

Then there are other ventures that are actually parts of private universities and reside within colleges of mass communication and journalism or other departments. They include the New England Center for Investigative Reporting at Boston University, the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University and the Stabile Center for Investigative Reporting at Columbia University.

All the nonprofits primarily distribute their work on their Web sites and through established newspaper and broadcast companies that many of the nonprofit journalists worked for that have become an outsourcing model.

But a new trend is merging that is far more collaborative. The nonprofit newsrooms are beginning to work more often with PBS and NPR stations, both local and national. The stations are seeking more content, especially local, and the nonprofit newsrooms are seeking greater distribution of their work through collaborations in addition to providing free content to for-profit companies.

Many nonprofits are in discussions with local PBS or NPR stations about taking office space at the stations. The St. Louis Beacon is already located in a PBS station as is the Rocky Mountain Investigative News Network in Denver.

Meanwhile, the consortium of nonprofit news organizations formed last year has grown into the Investigative News Network (INN), which now has 45 member organizations and is adding more monthly. (Fu

ll disclosure: I am the chair of the board of directors of INN.)

The network is developing cost efficiencies by sharing administrative tasks, pooling resources and getting group discounts. It also is promoting editorial collaborations among the members to do high impact stories they could not do alone. (See campus sexual assault stories – [www.publicintegrity.org/projects/entry/1847/](http://www.publicintegrity.org/projects/entry/1847/)). The network also is developing better technology strategies and working on syndication of stories for revenues.

The key issue for everyone is the word of the year: “Sustainability.”

There is a wide recognition that not all the new and old nonprofits can survive off the generous contributions from national donors like the Knight Foundation, the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, the Open Society Institute and the McCormick Foundation. Nor can individual donors like Buzz Woolley of the Voice of San Diego, John Thornton of the Texas Tribune or the Sandler family – which has put up tens of millions of dollars for ProPublica – be the final answer.

From many discussions at numerous conferences, the consensus is that the nonprofits must find ways to sustain themselves with non-grant revenue at a time when long-time for-profit newsrooms have been losing the battle to do so.

Newsrooms are seeking to generate diverse revenue streams through tried and true nonprofit strategies such as donations, sponsorships and memberships in the PBS and NPR model. They also are seeking individual donations for particular stories without violating ethical standards – sometimes a tricky proposition. But newsrooms also are looking at taking on advertising dollars, doing special projects for fees, setting up side investigative and research businesses, syndication to local and regional media outlets or doing training for journalists and the public.

A key element for the smaller nonprofits is community and regional support. Without local support for the editorial content they produce, they can't survive. The sources of revenue, whether donations or sponsorships or sales, will simply dry up and national foundations are highly unlikely to fund an organization that the community does not back.

For the larger nonprofits, the challenge is equally difficult. They must supplement their donations by building a wider audience that will pay for the news through syndication and partnerships with large media companies.

There will be nonprofit newsrooms that fail because of the lack of support or having enough business savvy. Or they will fail because of the typical small nonprofit burnout syndrome caused by a combination of having to do reporting, administration and fundraising.

But most have as good a chance of any other venture because they are they have embraced digital techniques and the online world. They are not weighed down by tradition, printing presses and high overhead. They can be nimble and change.

Most of all, they are passionate and dedicated about what they are doing and not the money – which is why journalism has always survived.