

## **New non-profit news organization**

By Ron Buel/10/2009

A new non-profit organization supporting investigative and in-depth reporting on the web has much to recommend it for Portland. The Oregonian has trash-canned its investigative team, although reporters like Brent Walth and Jeff Manning continue to do their own investigative work. The Oregonian continues to shrink its reporting team and currently is offering buy-outs to another 60 editorial people. Nigel Jacquiss at Willamette Week continues to do some amazing investigative reporting, and it is no surprise that he has won a Pulitzer Prize for that publication.

But the gaps in coverage, the stories that are untold and can be uncovered by solid reporting, are growing in size here. Holding our public institutions, private corporations and our democratically-elected officials accountable is becoming more and more difficult as investigative journalism is down-sized here. The voting and taxpaying publics are the losers in this equation.

There are many questions to be answered in setting up such a non-profit. Can we find large individual donors and/or local foundations to put up the initial funding? Where can we get help from national foundations?

How much money is needed to start? How much on a continuing basis?

Is OPB willing to step up to play this role? Or should we add to its planned efforts by creating a new non-profit focused on investigative and in-depth reporting?

In reviewing on-line news sites (see the separate piece getting into details of financing and operating an on-line news site, and the additional piece proposing innovative revenue models), we have had the opportunity to review the approaches and work of online news sites in Minneapolis, Seattle, Denver, St. Louis and several other cities.

Standing out as a perfect model is voiceofsandiego.org, a non-profit which has a staff of 11 journalists and supports itself largely through foundation grants and individual subscriptions from 900-plus persons. It does sell some online advertising, but does not see that as a major pillar of its funding.

It's best to hear directly from the organization's leaders. Andrew Donohue and Scott Lewis wrote an article for Nieman Reports, which I have excerpted from below.

“There's a common refrain that comes with many commentaries lamenting the decline of newspapers these days: Investigative reporting is an expensive endeavor.

“Our experience proves that bit of conventional wisdom dead wrong. For the past four years, we've been running voiceofsandiego.org, a nonprofit online-only daily publication

dedicated to local in-depth and investigative reporting. And, on a budget of less than one million dollars, we've been able to produce stories that have an impact on a daily basis by running an efficient organization of full-time, professional journalists free from the burden of printing an actual paper.

“Indeed, we've learned that it's not investigative reporting that's expensive, it's printing a newspaper.

“Still, the decline of the major daily newspaper in metropolitan areas around the nation means that more and more important stories are going untold, especially in America's big cities. While it won't be the only vision for journalism's future to spring up as newspapers shrink, the nonprofit online-only model is uniquely situated to fill the rapidly growing gaps in the local news landscape for a number of reasons:

“**Efficiency:** The Internet is simply more efficient and cost-effective than any other medium available to a local entity. While print still provides newspapers with a lion's share of their revenue, that share is continually declining, and we can plan for the future without having to drag a dying paper product with us. Especially in local investigative reporting where there are few travel costs, investigative reporting is more about mission than it is about cost.

“**Mission:** Reporters step into this newsroom with a very clear mission: produce in-depth and investigative reporting. They don't have to worry about being a paper of record, covering a celebrity trial, rushing to a harmless house fire, or figuring out what direction their general-interest publication is going. They learn how to let the small stuff slide in order to go after the more ambitious stories. They don't touch anything if it isn't a clearly local story. This is our best route to making the biggest impact.

“**Measuring Success:** As a nonprofit, our success is measured in one simple metric: the impact of our stories. Dedicated journalists forever have measured their success by the impact of their stories. But their organizations as a whole have always had different measurements. Quality journalism in many of those is important. But so is returning a profit to the owner or shareholders. And in today's market, when newspaper Web sites are scratching and clawing for every hit in order to raise advertising revenues, those goals of providing meaningful journalism and profits can directly collide. We don't have to make money for anyone, just make our budget. And when we go to our board of directors every quarter, we have a very simple question to answer: What was the impact of your stories?

“**Deciding What Stories to Cover:** We don't try to be what the newspaper used to be—and is still trying desperately to be—a general-interest collection of things. It's easy to get stretched a mile wide and an inch deep, especially when you're operating on limited resources. People every day always want to know why we don't cover this or that.

“From our first day our job has been to fill the gaps between what people want from their

local media and what they have. So how do we decide what we cover? This is a key question, and the answer is likely different in every community, but the principles that guide our decision-making are firm.

1. We cover something only if we can do it better than anyone else or if no one else is doing it (which, by default, would make us the best at it).
2. We look at what issues aren't getting sufficient coverage in the local media.
3. In San Diego, we've gradually identified those as the cornerstone quality of life issues. Those aren't static, though. As local media outlets continue to shrink at an alarming rate, the gaps that we were created to fill keep expanding.

“As we decide how to handle this situation, again we find benefit and direction in our mission. Throughout 2007 and 2008, there were many distractions in San Diego, as in any big city, that could have proved devastating to any long-term investigative projects. A less disciplined approach would have had us running around with the media pack from daily press conferences that can bog down a beat to the scandalous trial of the day, only to duplicate what other news outlets were already covering. Despite cuts, there are still plenty of reporters in town doing this kind of coverage.

“But time and time again, we reminded ourselves to stay focused—focused on doing something special, on making sure we added something to a community that needed it.

“It was during that period that we performed arguably the most significant and sustained investigative journalism to emerge from any outlet in the city. We broke open scandals at two local redevelopment agencies that have led to criminal charges, scrapped development projects, and complete overhauls at the agencies. We exposed the police chief's lengthy history of misrepresenting crime statistics, detailed a school official's financial misdeeds, and unveiled a group of other investigations that never would have been told without the emergence of a new local publication.”