**Program on Independent Journalism**

**Support to Investigative Journalism 2013-2015: Portfolio Review**

The early work of the Program in support of investigative journalism was done under the training portfolio and mostly meant support for training, since obtaining the skills in this field are, very likely, an essential part of any advanced training for journalists. Our support to the investigative journalism conferences in the early days was provided also mainly because they are essentially peer-to-peer training and mentoring exercises - a premise that is probably is even more true today.

The separate full-fledged portfolio was created because we wanted to better respond to pressures that investigative journalism was under in the mainstream media, and exploit the momentum created by the accelerating move of investigative journalism to non-profit structures and the increasing appetite for collaboration in what was traditionally considered an occupation for “lone wolfs”.

We did not have an illusion that we would be able to compensate for the loss of investigative journalism capacity in the mainstream media (therefore did not attempt to directly support investigative teams in the newsrooms, for instance), while at the same time helping to nurture it in places where it never really existed. The goal was rather to minimize this loss of capacity as much as possible, and to a certain degree to restore it, by helping the new investigative journalism eco-system to emerge and grow using the transformation in journalism, media and the world to its advantage. Instead of tackling the negative trends in media head-on, while designing this “asymmetric response” strategy we took into account the opportunities offered by the increasing pace of globalization, advances in information and communication field, abundance of data (a lot of it being in the public domain) and entrance into the field, which was once an exclusive preserve of the professionals, of a myriad of “citizen journalists”, hackers, NGOs and activists. We were also counting on the growing realization among the civil society actors and in the general public that watchdog journalism is essential for democracy, development and protection of human rights, and on the increasing concern about its decline. Above all we were counting on the committed global community of investigative journalists willing to continue their work in the setting of non-profit outlets or sometimes as informal groups (both of which had a positive side of being free from the restraints of working for mainstream media), publishing almost exclusively online, and despite having to continuously worry about finding the money for their operations.

Thus, we based our work on the assumptions that:

1. Investigative journalism being squeezed out of mainstream media is finding a home primarily at non-profit organizations around the world, which therefore needed support to stay afloat and develop;
2. As the quality of their stories grow and their investigations become more daring and hard-hitting, they will be able to reach bigger audiences and make greater impact – including via partnerships with mainstream media that still retained sizeable readership, brand and established distribution channels;
3. These non-profits underpin regional and international networks of investigative journalists;
4. At the same time, only part of international networking and collaboration takes place via them, therefore there is a need to support a variety of platforms and vehicles that enable and facilitate it;
5. The on-going loss in “backroom support”, institutional memory, and some level of protection that the mainstream media has been providing, can partially be compensated by creating online information repositories and collaboration platforms open to all journalists, and by raising profiles of individual journalists through international collaboration;
6. The precarious situation of investigative journalism and investigative journalists, coupled with increasing number of topics that could not be investigated solely within the borders of a single state, will push journalists towards greater collaboration – both domestically and internationally;
7. This collaboration, in conjunction with greater use of technology, would allow pooling of resources and distribute the costs of producing stories among greater number of players, potentially lowering these costs.
8. Success or failure of the investigative newsrooms – including in fundraising and earning revenue - is overwhelmingly determined by the quality of the stories that they produce;
9. The journalists whom are supporting are well-versed in protecting themselves, their data, sources and communications and thus – by and large – are able to cope with existing threats with only occasional support from us “as needed”.

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Peer networking, in our view, was and is perhaps the most practical way to counteract the decline of investigative journalism in legacy media, connect scattered “lone wolfs”, enable them to tackle stories with international or global leads and ramifications, and provide them with a degree of protection, as well as with more skills and publishing opportunities. As a veteran Peruvian investigative journalist Gustavo Gorriti noted, “through networking, the limited means of many small, often precarious, investigative journalism outfits can be assembled into a symbiotic coalition of efforts that, as long as they are well led and coordinated, can deliver powerful investigations, sometimes with a breadth and reach, (perhaps not yet the depth), that surpasses the best investigations at the heyday of the traditional press.” Networking, as well as peer training and mentoring, is also a way to nurture the new generation of investigative journalists, many of whom have never worked in legacy media newsrooms, are often self-taught and at the same time very open for sharing ideas and collaborating, make extensive use of ICT tools and feel entirely comfortable working outside rigidly structured organizations.

During the period that is being reviewed we have continued, and in most cases increased, support to networks in Europe and the Middle East, as well as to the global International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN). There are two types of networks that we work with: whereas the ICIJ and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) are above all producing stories, others - such as the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism and Journalismfund.eu – primarily provide financial, mentoring/training, legal and editorial support to individual journalists or teams pursuing their own investigations (in the case of the Journalismfund, exclusively cross-border European stories) selected for support via competitive bids. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network does both reporting (although only a part of it is investigative) and training, as well as engages in other work. GIJN with it is diverse membership, positions itself as an umbrella for the entire field, acting as connector and facilitator (the roles that prior to GIJN’s institutionalization we also tried to play), catalyst, (co)organizer of global (and at times regional) conferences and a provider of learning tools for the entire field.

Our conversations with nascent networks in sub-Saharan Africa (the African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting) and Latin America (Connectas and an emerging one of veteran investigative journalists that we see as probably following ICIJ’s model) are at a stage of considering their fresh proposals to us. In Asia, the biggest and probably the most diverse continent, we supported – via GIJN - the first Asian investigative journalism conference (over 300 participants from 33 countries) in 2014 (another one is scheduled for 2016) in an attempt to facilitate the emergence of cross-border collaborations around specific projects as a way to build networks from the ground up. In Africa we suffered a setback in 2013-2014, as the Forum for African Investigative Reporters (FAIR) collapsed. A group of several ex-members of FAIR formed an informal group called African Investigative Publishing Collective and approached us, however we are taking cautious stance. Another network, Finance Uncovered, which is based in London, just came out with its first investigation done in partnership with African journalists and investigative newsrooms, and we will be meeting with them shortly.

We are, therefore, engaged to one degree or another with most, if not all, international networks of investigative journalists (quite possibly the only donor to do so), and follow the development and work of investigative journalism arms of international NGOs, such as Global Witness, Transparency International, Greenpeace, but at present do not have plans to support them as we would like to keep the distinction between journalism and advocacy.

As the next phase of our engagement with these networks, we would like to support intensified collaboration between them across continents (and across Sahara in case of Africa). We did provide some support to that end over the years by, for example, financing small-scale exchange of expertise between FAIR and ABRAJI in Brazil, training of data researchers from Africa, the Middle East and Latin America by the OCCRP and establishment of regional hubs of its Investigative Dashboard database of company records, and above all the work of ICIJ, but would like such collaboration to become routine and involve multiple actors. Therefore, we are entertaining ideas of joint projects between European and Arab, as well as between European and African journalists under the auspices of ARIJ, Journalismfund and, possibly, ANCIR.

It is clear to us that a prospect of getting funded should not be the main incentive for collaboration between journalists and their organizations. We do not, therefore, want to push our grantees to start something that they are not yet ready for, as this would be counter-productive.

Over the years we have several times revisited the decision not to support directly investigative journalism in legacy media newsrooms (indirectly, we did provide some support in MENA as ARIJ used part of our and other donors’ funding to establish and prop up for some time investigative teams in several Arab newsrooms – an effort that largely was unsuccessful), and decided not to change it. The costs would have been beyond our means, the mentality there was too competitive, and, in some cases, the interests too vested or the commitment too fickle. Instead, we were counting on legacy media, including the big titles, eventually noticing the stories being produced by the non-profit investigative reporting outlets and networks as their quality was growing, and it seems that this is happening. The prime example is ICIJ, which in a few years managed to establish numerous partnerships (around 70 outlets collaborated on SwissLeaks) with media on all continents, including several national broadcasters, The Washington Post, The Guardian, El Pais, Le Monde, Suddeutsche Zeitung, Asahi Shimbun, Folha de Sao Paulo and other major titles, whereby the latter assign their experienced reporters to work with ICIJ on stories from the onset and – in case of Le Monde and SwissLeaks – give the data in their possession to ICIJ when it is too complex for them to handle and/or when they want to achieve greater impact. Recently several ARIJ’s investigations have been commissioned by the BBC Arabic and Al-Jazeera. Swedish national television closely collaborated with OCCRP’s on TeliaSonera investigation and other OCCRP stories were (re)published by Western media, including a front-page story in The Guardian. Re:Baltica, the Baltic investigative reporting centre, has been jointly commissioned by the national broadcasters of all three Baltic States to produce a TV investigation into Russia’s soft power in the Baltics. Apart from co-producing and/or publishing the stories made by investigative reporting non-profits, legacy media send their journalists to the training and other events conducted by these non-profits. For example, journalists of a major international newspaper took part in an investigathon that OCCRP ran last year to look into London properties of Russian and Eastern European oligarchs; many journalists working for the big media titles attend summer schools organized by the Centre for Investigative Journalism UK; and – of course - the global and regional investigative journalism conferences.

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The conferences, with all due scepticism that one may have towards big gatherings, are in my view necessary, since they provide the ground for forging relationships and building trust that is essential for any future collaborations, mapping collaborative investigations, showing the latest achievements in the use of new tools and data mining (the data journalism track is very prominent in the global conference, as well as in almost all regional ones), and give a feeling of camaraderie – not to mention the inspiration - to journalists many of whom work in rather harsh environments. At least two regional networks were inspired by (or created at) the Global conferences. In essence, the conferences are peer training and mentoring events. A secondary, but nevertheless important, function that they have is drawing attention of potential donors towards the field, the diverse and growing community of investigative journalists and their work.

The Global conference takes place every two years since 2001 and keeps growing both in the number of participants and in the breadth and depth of the agenda. GIJC 2015 that took place in mid-October in Lillehammer attracted over 900 participants from over 120 countries and featured more than 160 panels, workshops and special events (the Rio conference in 2013 brought together around 1,350 participants, but it was the Brazilian, the Latin American and the global gatherings rolled into one). The African, Latin American, and MENA conferences happen annually. One of the very useful roles that they play is facilitating sharing of expertise not only between journalists from respective continents and regions, but also by speakers and trainers from other continents who present and teach models, tools and methods invented and used elsewhere to a much bigger audience of journalists from a given region than only those who are able to attend the global event. That function, in my view, should be strengthened as much as possible, since it also facilitates the inter-regional and inter-continental collaboration described above.

As mentioned, 2014 saw the first Asian conference “Asia Uncovered”, and with our support the first Caribbean investigative journalism meeting is taking place in early November 2015.

About two years ago we started a conversation with some of the key partners on whether the big gatherings – given the effort and cost that goes into them - could be replaced by smaller specialized events focusing on covering specific fields, and – together with the Public Health Programs – the PIJ funded a conference on covering the medical and pharmaceutical industry. The transformations within our own Program during late 2013 and most of 2014 proved to be a distraction from exploring this further and we are yet to return to this conversation. Still I tend to think that, at least for the time being, specialized gatherings would be more effective if they supplemented rather than replaced those listed above.

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Another layer of continuous and multi-channel cross-border collaboration on stories is enabled by shared databases, communication platforms and other online tools. Whereas we did support some of those, including seed funding for and further development of the Investigative Dashboard, the multi-language capabilities of the Document Cloud, the Money Politics database of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, secure collaboration platform for ICIJ members (as part of core support to ICIJ), training on the use of Visual Investigative Scenarios (a visualization tool), creation of Colombian version of Poderopedia, our approach is rather conservative - i.e. we do support development of tools which would perform specific functions relevant to the work on investigative journalists across the field, which are developed either by journalists’ organizations or at least with their intense participation from the start, and which would be immediately used by at least one of those organizations. This, however, is not a guarantee against failure (especially in such a rapidly and continuously evolving field as technological innovation) and we learned a bitter lesson – and wasted a substantial amount of money – about four years ago with Ujima Project (a global collection of datasets primarily on international and bilateral development aid) that ended up in the ranks of “abandonware”. The question that is being raised by some of our advisory board members is whether journalists at all should engage in software development, since sooner or later there will appear a commercial product developed for the particular niche that the journalists are trying to fill, and it will very likely be better done, backed by customer support, continuously upgraded and adopted to evolving operating systems and platforms, professionally marketed, etc. That question requires thorough discussion and, even if we decide not to entirely withdraw from supporting software development, will help us define more precisely development of what kind of products we should be supporting. A safer and perhaps more prudent approach would be that of the “fast followers” rather than funders of the cutting-edge innovation.

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In 2012 we reviewed our approach towards providing core funding to individual investigative reporting non-profits and, in some cases, national associations of investigative journalists. (At some point a dozen such organizations in Asia, Europe and Latin America were receiving core support from us). Giving them core support in the initial stage of their existence was, I believe, justified, especially that we were mostly supporting them in countries with very little history of investigative reporting and/or with high concentration of media ownership and strong influence by owners interests on what journalists could or could not cover. Besides, in our view these organizations underpinned the international networks described above.

This approach, however, led to excessive dependence of grantees on OSFs’ funding, tied down a growing proportion of our budget, and in some cases served as a disincentive for the grantees to intensely work on their business models and diversification of funding sources. As the number of investigative journalism non-profits around the world continued to grow due, in part, to the lowered “entry costs” (from 39 groups in 26 countries in 2007 to 106 in 47 countries in 2012, and to 137 in 60 countries in mid-2015), and – moreover - as at times several groups from the same country would approach us for funding, the futility of continuing applying this tactic became evident.

In late 2012 we spoke to each grantee in this category about possible ways of supporting them in the future without providing on-going core support, gave tie-off grants to those whose core support funding from us was about to expire, and discussed with regional networks of investigative non-profits, such as OCCRP, possibilities of using regional funding to finance at least some work of selected members.

During the review period, core support to individual non-profits has been provided either as the first-time support (usually in early stages of existence of grantee organizations) or emergency/bridge support meant to allow breathing space for the grantees to launch specific projects (such as expand onto new delivery platforms, create databases), establish track-record in order to be able to approach other donors, diversify funding sources and explore ways to earn revenue. In case of IDL-Reporteros, a long-standing grantee in Peru, continued core support – along with some encouragement - has been provided to enable it to develop a regional network of veteran investigative journalists.

Our current strategy envisages providing core support to individual non-profits primarily as “developmental funding”, a stepping stone towards creating diversified funding base, including establishing sources of earned revenue. We do realize that success will not be possible in all cases to the extent whereby our funding could be entirely phased out (besides, emergencies will happen). There will be instances when we need to step in again from time to time, but we are not committing ourselves to continued core funding and are making it known to existing and potential grantees.

Collaboration between investigative journalists within a given country is, in our view, no less essential than across borders. It might be more difficult to achieve, however, given the competition, history of personal relationships, a tendency by donors of each picking a different organization to support (which will become more pronounced in this field too, as more donors start supporting investigative journalism), etc. Whereas we do make our own choices whom to support, based on our own criteria, our position is to encourage collaboration wherever possible. In Mexico, for instance, instead of entertaining ideas of three or four prominent journalists, each of whom wanted to create his/her own investigative reporting centre, we are discussing with them a possibility to create a structure which would support theirs – and others – investigations by providing small grants, legal and editorial assistance and, as needed, mentoring, while not necessarily being a publishing platform in its own right.

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One other thing that by now is clear to us and, I believe, to the majority of our grantees is that good journalism alone is not a sufficient prerequisite to achieving impact, mobilising support to one’s work and protecting one from financial and other woes. It is necessary to continue raising the profile – both domestically and where possible internationally (this is where the peer networking and collaboration, as well as publishing partnerships, come into the picture again); engaging broader audiences (including by expanding to new delivery platforms, innovating the ways of story-telling) and building communities of support, focusing on the business side of operations and learning new ways of earning money – all the while remaining true to the mission.

Success, however, also brings more of unwanted attention and increased risks that are inherent to working in this field and evolve alongside it. As journalists harness online tools for reporting and networking, authorities are stepping up electronic surveillance and censorship (blocking of sites, DDOS attacks, hacking, trolling to undermine credibility of stories). As investigative reporting moves to non-profit newsrooms, NGOs are being harassed and shut down by a number of governments. Legal harassment is widely used, and non-profit newsrooms with their meagre resources are especially vulnerable to costly lawsuits, thus prevention – including adherence to high editorial standards – is critically important.

Our support is, therefore, directed at helping investigative reporting organizations and networks (and, in certain cases, informal groups formed around specific projects) to achieve greater impact by using existing and emerging opportunities for: 1) off-line and on-line collaboration (including inter-disciplinary); 2) obtaining, processing and presenting information; and 3) publishing; while at the same time being better able to withstand financial crises and protect themselves against threats, old and new. As is, hopefully, evident from what was said above, the shift in our approach that was occurring during the review period was the reversal in priorities: from supporting, in the first place, individual non-profit investigative newsrooms to primarily supporting vehicles that facilitate and bring to fruition international collaboration between both these newsrooms and individual journalists. I believe that this shift also corresponds to the evolution of the field and takes into account the increasing volume of on-going exchanges and number of platforms used to facilitate them; increasingly flexible frameworks of partnerships that do not necessarily rest on established structures; the growing strength of networks; some revival of interest in investigative journalism in both legacy and new media (which are becoming partners for these networks); and growing – even if slowly – number of donors willing to finance the field.

As we are continuing supporting organizations and initiatives that benefit the entire field, as well as get involved into new projects (such as the libel insurance fund) with the same goal in mind, we will – despite the shifted focus – stay engaged with individual investigative newsrooms, providing support along the lines mentioned above and, especially, focusing on helping those working in very hostile environments to become more resilient.

Did our support help our grantees to become healthier and stronger organizations? I would say, not necessarily or not always. But – almost three years later all of them, except one, are alive, even if continuing to face multiple challenges. Many of them did manage to diversify their funding, the investigations undertaken by some of them had big resonance and tangible impact, the scope and depth of partnerships keeps growing, increasingly complex topics are being tackled and more ambitious projects are being launched. I believe that collaborations are much more numerous and take place in a variety of formats and settings. Thus, the field itself seems to be more vibrant and, I dare say, those whom we were supporting contributed to this a great deal.