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Philanthropic Foundations: Growing Funders of the News

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About David Westphal

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David Westphal is executive in residence at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication. Until joining USC in fall 2008 he was Washington editor of McClatchy Newspapers, the nation's third-largest newspaper company. Westphal joined McClatchy in 1995 as deputy bureau chief and was named bureau chief in 1998. With McClatchy's purchase of Knight Ridder in 2006, he became editor of the combined Washington bureaus and the McClatchy Tribune News Service. Previously, he was managing editor of The Des Moines Register in Iowa for almost 7 years. His newspaper career spanned nearly four decades.

Background

In late April 2008, nearly three dozen people gathered in New York City to think about the role of foundations and philanthropy in a journalism world that had grown increasingly threatened. The organizations that convened the day-long meeting – the Center on Communication Leadership and Policy at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication, and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University – posed these questions: Might foundations and their funders provide important answers to the news business’ fast decline? And if so, how might that happen?

Guided by the conveners, Geoffrey Cowan, Alex Jones and Orville Schell, the group expressed caution about how big a role foundations could or should play in supporting journalism. At the same time, members produced a menu of ideas: the creation of new journalism arms at NGOs; collaborations between foundations and for-profit news organizations; university investment in news businesses; seed money for entirely new information enterprises. In this report David Westphal, of USC’s Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, provides an update on that meeting based on new thoughts from the attendees.

INTRODUCTION

Even those who were pessimistic a year ago at prospects for the American news business had to be taken aback by the swiftness of the decline that has occurred since then. A major newspaper, the Rocky Mountain News, has closed its doors. Another newspaper, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, has silenced its presses while maintaining a small, Web-only operation. Several major newspapers are in bankruptcy; others, such as the Boston Globe and San Francisco Chronicle, are threatened with closure. The New York Times required a major cash infusion from Mexico’s richest businessman. Even those with a stronger balance sheet are reeling against an advertising recession that saw newspaper revenue decline 17 percent last year and 25-30 percent in the first quarter of 2009.

It’s not just newspapers that are in trouble. Virtually every news operation of any kind is under stress on multiple fronts: a miserable economy, overleveraged balance sheets and the disruptive effects of the digital revolution. Tens of thousands of journalists have taken buyouts or

been laid off. Washington bureaus and statehouse reporting corps have been shut down; foreign bureaus have been reduced to a fraction of their former size. NPR closed down most of its West Coast operation. The speed with which all of this has occurred has been mesmerizing, and it has led some to wonder how society’s essential information needs will be met. “When we had the meeting last year we saw a need,” said USC’s Geoffrey Cowan, one of the conveners. “But now we’re in a state of desperation. The collapse of the traditional economic model has increased both the need for nonprofit journalism, but also the receptivity toward it.”

Even as legacy news organizations struggle for survival, new information sources are springing up – often as one or two-person sites that provide news and information about communities, neighborhoods and topics of interest. In many cases, these sites have established that small-scale, Web-only operations can deliver robust news reports, with technology that provides far better two-way communication than has

ever before existed. But for most of them, a sustainable business model has not yet emerged, principally because digital advertising has not proven it can support a news organization that looks anything like the ones Americans have come to know in the last half-century. This is hardly surprising, given the magnitude of the revolution at hand. But it presents the question of what will become of news and information until new models emerge.

Against that backdrop, the worlds of foundations and philanthropy are being looked to in unprecedented ways to serve as a firewall against the disappearance of critical news and information. To some extent the expectations are a mismatch: Even in its weakened state, the newspaper industry alone is a \$35 billion-a-year enterprise, no match for a foundation world that also finds itself much diminished by a sliding stock market. But to a surprising degree, foundations are responding on multiple fronts, and there are indications that a much more robust reaction may be in the works. Alberto Ibarguen, who directs journalism's most important funder, the Knight Foundation, says he's been talking quietly for the last two years with some of the nation's biggest foundations, and believes several of them may get into journalism funding in a significant way.

At somewhat smaller levels, the process of greater investment by foundations in journalism is well under way. It can be clearly seen in the world of investigative reporting, a singularly threatened and critical area of watchdog journalism. The Center for Public Integrity is once again thriving after a period of financial uncertainty, and is reporting unsolicited queries from potential funders. The Center for Investigative Reporting recently announced it would establish a California-oriented arm with a staff of about 10 producing state-related investigative reporting – the result of \$2.4 million in foundation grants. Other state-oriented investigative sites are emerging, and so are local sites that are taking investigative reporting right to the grassroots.

Foundations are also moving into topical

journalism in areas such as health, science and the arts. The Kaiser Family Foundation recently launched its Kaiser Health Service project, aimed at filling a growing void of national health coverage. Similarly, the California HealthCare Foundation is creating, with the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Journalism, a health reporting network focusing principally on California policy issues. In a different model, NGOs are using their existing information-gathering resources to establish journalism arms that convert academic-style reports into consumer-sized news products.

Community news Web sites are also getting into the act, soliciting foundation grants to support hybrid business models that rely on a combination of philanthropy and private-sector revenue. One of the most prominent community Web sites, the Voice of San Diego, has established science and environmental reporting positions, partly through foundation grants. Community foundation grants have already gone to dozens of local news sites, and a new \$24 million Knight Foundation program aims to accelerate this trend.

How far this trend will go, or should go, cannot be predicted. Associated Press chief executive Tom Curley says foundations will likely play a small role in the digital revolution because entrepreneurs “are moving too fast to plug gaps.” He's not alone. Almost to a person, participants in last year's meeting cautioned that foundations could never play a dominant national role. But until a new business model emerges as a reliable source of news funding, the continuing decline in traditional news reporting is likely to tempt foundations to become part of the solution, if only on a stopgap basis. Said Orville Schell, director of the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations: “I think because we are in such alarming times, when the media outlets on which the nation depends for news and information are simply melting away before our eyes like blocks of ice in the sun, it is probably true that more and more foundation and philanthropic money will begin to flow.”

Foundations: Increasingly a news and information player

The conventional wisdom about foundations and other philanthropy is that they simply will not be much of a factor as the news industry goes through the convulsions of the digital revolution. But some revision is in order. A growing number of foundations are getting into the business of supporting news-and-information nonprofits. That trend appears to be accelerating, and there's some indication that major foundations may get into the act as well.

The Knight Foundation's Alberto Ibarguen said he has spent the last two years being a "Johnny One Note" with other foundation presidents, arguing behind the scenes that they need to consider journalism as an emergency need in their grant programs. "I think it's safe to say there's a growing understanding you can't run a democracy without a free flow of information," said Ibarguen. After a series of meetings, with more to come, Ibarguen said he thinks it's possible some major U.S. foundations will increase their funding of news and information projects, and others might do so for the first time.

A recent study by American University's J-Lab found that foundations had contributed \$128 million to community and investigative reporting nonprofits between 2005 and 2009. As director Jan Schaffer said, "One thing is clear: Philanthropic foundations are increasingly embracing the idea that journalism projects can be a funding fit."

Norman Pearlstine, chief content officer at Bloomberg, said the notion makes sense to him. "I think there are some people – high net-worth individuals – who might want to acquire a newspaper and go the foundation route rather than operating it as a business," he said. "I can also imagine community leaders saying, 'It's good to have a baseball team in town, but it's also good to have a newspaper.' It's entirely possible this will happen."

Investigative reporting

In a world without philanthropists and foundations, the practice of investigative reporting might not be long for this world. It's expensive, it's time-consuming, it has an unreliable payoff – and there's no obvious free-market way to make sure it gets done in the new-media world. This is a message that seems to be getting through to funders. Somewhat to their surprise, three major investigative reporting nonprofits are on a roll. The Center for Public Integrity, ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Reporting are all seeing growing opportunities for nonprofit investigative work, and they are all hopeful about future funding.

In a scenario few thought possible, cold calls are sometimes coming from the opposite direction – from foundations wondering if they might play a role in financing investigative reporting. "One of the interesting things that's happening is that the demise of media is occurring so quickly that it does have the attention of funders," said Bill Buzenberg, who runs the Center for Public Integrity. "New funders have come to us – in part because they see what's happening. They're as worried as we are about the watchdog function."

Investigative reporting held a center seat a year ago at the New York gathering on foundation-funded journalism. Joining Buzenberg were Robert Rosenthal, director of the Center for Investigative Reporting, and Paul Steiger and Richard Tofel of ProPublica. All three nonprofits have stepped up the pace of their work since then. The latest example is Rosenthal's May unveiling of a California investigative reporting unit that will focus on education and other public policy issues in the nation's largest state. With grants of \$1.2 million each from the James Irvine Foundation and the William and Flora Hewitt Foundation, Rosenthal hopes to hire as many as 10 journalists to staff the new center. Rosenthal, who took over CIR in January 2008, says he also has seen a night-and-day transformation in the interest level of foundations. "One big difference has been that funders previously tended to fund the story," he said. "Now they're much more willing to be supportive of the core." One clear sign of the groups' success: The Associated Press

recently announced it would disseminate the work of four top investigative nonprofits.

ProPublica's Tofel says investigative reporting is emerging as one of the arenas many people agree must be preserved even as newspapers and other mainstream institutions decline. "I would identify investigative journalism and international reporting as the clearest cases here," said Tofel. "But serious, analytical metro coverage may also be joining the list – and there could be more to come."

CIR's California operation is the latest example of investigating reporting units that are being established on a state or region-wide basis. Two other nonprofits, the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism and the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, are both up and running, and they hold the promise of a much larger collection of state and regional nonprofits focusing on watchdog reporting. In fact, Buzenberg and Rosenthal have already been discussing the possibility of bringing together all the state and regional operations in a network that could offer operational efficiencies and a common Web portal. Many of the investigative nonprofits gathered in New York in late June to talk about those and other issues.

Other new investigative reporting nonprofits are setting up shop. Arianna Huffington launched the Huffington Post Investigative Fund, a \$1.75 million startup that will begin its existence looking into the economic crisis. Then there's SpotUs, David Cohn's trailblazing initiative to tap the crowd for both story ideas and dollars in the interest of producing investigative work.

Nonprofit investigative reporting sites are also showing up at the local level, with startups in Baltimore and Texas, among other locations. Where this is going is anyone's guess, but it's surely a mistake to assume we have seen the last of the new models. As evidence, consider the Goldwater Institute, a conservative think tank, which is advertising for an investigative reporter who will hunt for examples of wasteful government spending.

NGOs

The traditional model of foundation-funded journalism is simple: A foundation sends a check to a non-profit journalistic organization to support reporting and dissemination of the news. But these days it's hardly the only model. Human Rights Watch is attempting something quite different. It's leveraging an already robust network of fact-gatherers around the world by adding a small unit that converts its academic-type research into consumer-friendly news reports.

Carroll Bogert, Human Rights Watch's associate director, said NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and others are in good position to use their expertise to become important news resources. But can Human Rights Watch muster the credibility needed to deliver the news even as it acts as advocate for human rights? Absolutely, says Bogert, "I would say that in general, we do much more than journalists do to assure we have the facts right."

Bogert's concern is actually a different one – and it's something that might surprise journalists: Some of the nonprofit's 75-80 researchers aren't thrilled with the idea of seeing their work translated, in-house, into journalism. "Journalism to a lot of people means sloppy, it means fast," said Bogert. "People are worried about whether that would change what we do."

Not many approach this question from a better position than Bogert, who was a foreign reporter and editor at Newsweek before joining Human Rights Watch. And not many NGOs are better positioned to test their ability to morph into a news-providing role than this one, with staffers monitoring rights violations in 80 countries worldwide. Bogert has hired a small group of journalists (mostly video and audio editors/producers) to convert the organization's typically long, dry reports into video clips aimed at news consumers. A recent report documented how Hamas used the recent battle in Gaza as cover for attacking

political opponents there.

While video reports such as this, which rely on the group's in-depth research, are on the rise, Human Rights Watch had envisioned adding the journalism component at a more rapid pace. But the economic collapse has slowed things down. "The world I envisioned, in which NGOs took over more reporting responsibilities, I think it's still the overall trendline," said Bogert. "But it's not going to happen as quickly."

Thinking big (As in 10 digits)

Alex Jones has led one of the nation's most prominent nonprofits, the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, for the past nine years. Like many, he doesn't think the fundamental answer to the news media's precipitous slide will be found in the largess of philanthropists and foundations. "The solution to what's happening to news media these days is going to be a commercial one," said Jones.

There are two exceptions, though, and one of them is a big one.

Jones wants one or more of the world's richest people to establish a \$2 billion endowment that would provide permanent funding for PBS' "NewsHour." "If Warren Buffett or a group of billionaires wanted to change the world, this is how they could do it," he said. "It'd be one hour of prime viewing time for every television in the country. It would give the United States the genuinely high-quality TV news operation that it has never had."

Jones' other idea: He thinks community foundations and philanthropists should pay visits to their hometown newspapers and talk about how they might finance a city hall reporting position, or a school board reporter.

These are among the recommendations Jones makes in his newbook, "Losing the News" (Oxford University Press). Jones said he is addressing the book to the American news consumer who sees traditional journalism receding but "doesn't understand what's happening or why."

In my interview with Jones, I asked whether he was hoping to re-create a BBC-type operation

in the United States. "No, no," he said. "That would be a much bigger proposition. I'm just talking about one hour of terrific television a night. It would be able to attract the top broadcast journalists in the business." And, Jones said, it would have a spillover effect on cable news, raising the bar for what the public demanded from national TV newscasts.

A \$2 billion endowment would yield an annual budget of \$100 million, he said, and would create a high-profile venue with sufficient "muzzle velocity" to become the gold standard for TV news. "It seems to me this is a way to make everything better," he said. "It would bring high-quality news to people who would otherwise have a problem finding high-quality news."

As for Jones' other idea, he made it clear he thought philanthropists and foundations ought to invest in reporting positions in newspapers, not in new-media startups where the practice of fund-raising for specific reporting slots has already begun. (Joel Kramer's MinnPost, for example, is raising money specifically to finance the work of media reporter David Brauer. And Firedoglake is trying to raise \$150,000 to pay for the investigative reporting of Marcy Wheeler.)

Why, I asked, would he limit this to legacy media, when digital startups are already making it happen? "News requires not only the ability to come up with the reporting," he said. "It requires having the right impact. That's why I think it would be much better to save these institutions, if we can, that already have the power to deliver. And to fight the good fight with their institutional muscle." Jones said endowing a reporting position would not be that expensive for many foundations and donors, and could result in immediate impact.

Neal Shapiro, president of New York's Thirteen/WNET, also thinks foundations need to enlarge their thinking about the kind of resources journalism may need to fulfill its news-and-information mission. "I think they can be a (substantially bigger) player and in many ways they may have to be," said Shapiro. "And yes, I do think public broadcasting is one area where you can produce quality journalism that has a tremendous reach. Foundations can play a bigger role here."

Voices of skepticism

Although many see promise in the rise of philanthropy and foundation dollars going to the support of journalism, some are less impressed, arguing they're a drop in the bucket compared to the money that will be generated by the private sector. A few fear that this money may get in the way of the innovation cycle needed to cure journalism's ills.

Tom Curley, chief executive of the Associated Press, said foundation-funded efforts will be dwarfed by the rise of entrepreneurship. "If content gaps are being created or imagined, journalist entrepreneurs seem to be rising with many varied sources of funding," he said. "I thought the foundation-funding idea was a naïve response last year and am more convinced of that. AP, for instance, would need \$6 billion to endow its core agency operation. Entrepreneurs are moving too fast to plug gaps."

New-media consultant Merrill Brown says the work that foundations are doing in supporting journalism is "noble and important... But it's second-level important. It's more important to get the advertising growing." To some extent, Brown said, foundation-funded journalism becomes "a distraction for how journalism is going to thrive in the future."

In looking to foundations, new-media startups are also confronting organizations that are having their own economic issues. Donald Kimelman, managing director of information initiatives for The Pew Charitable Trusts, says foundations, "like everyone else, are feeling the pain of the downturn. So it is tough to make the case for putting resources into a new area of interest, while cuts are being made in established areas of interests."

In addition, an old truism about philanthropy hasn't changed, says Peter Osnos, founder of Public Affairs Books. "Philanthropists get tired of funding things and they move on," he said. "Philanthropy is not really a viable, long-term model... I don't think the answer is a simple answer of philanthropy picking up the tab."

The advice of Bill Kling, chief executive of American Public Media, the second-largest producer and distributor of public radio

programming, is for foundations to stick with their traditional role of encouraging innovation. "Foundations can stimulate strong existing nonprofit news organizations to move more aggressively into new media. They can create some models of successful regional public media news organizations. And they can fund new experiments in content generation and dissemination. But, by and large the idea of 'create a new foundation-funded model' isn't likely to be sustainable... I have yet to see a viable business model that gets you from start-up to significance in a time frame any foundation could sustain."

Health funds its own news coverage

On June 1, the Kaiser Family Foundation launched Kaiser Health News, a major startup that could signal a wave of new foundation-supported news enterprises. In the health world, Kaiser will have company. The California HealthCare Foundation recently approved a \$3.5 million program, partnering with USC's Annenberg School of Journalism, that will provide news reporting on California health care policy issues. This model is certain to happen in other fields as well – the arts, science, environment, education – all arenas that have seen a fairly rapid decline in the news resources mustered by mainstream media.

The world of health is leading the way because it has two big advantages: very high consumer interest and, said Matt James, senior vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, "there are a lot of health funders." James said he began to see a decline in the quantity and quality of health reporting in 2003 and 2004, when it also began showing up in the pool of candidates for Kaiser's fellowship program. "We thought about changing the name to Kaiser Mid-Career Crisis Fellowship program," he joked. Today, he said, evidence of the cutbacks is "absolutely dramatic. Health reporters don't have the time, the resources, the travel time to do the good stories they'd like to do."

So was born, at Kaiser, the idea of funding a health news service that would be at arm's

length from the Kaiser foundation and would partner with news organizations to provide coverage that might not otherwise make its way into the news-and-information sphere. With a staff operating mostly out of Washington, D.C., Kaiser Health News will spend an estimated \$2 million this year, \$2.3 million in 2010 and eventually \$4 million to \$5 million a year, with a full-time staff of 12 journalists. Laurie McGinley, a 28-year veteran of the Wall Street Journal, heads Kaiser Health News, which also has its own Web site. Meanwhile, Michael Parks, journalism professor at USC and former Los Angeles Times editor, is assembling an L.A.-based news team that will report primarily on California health policy issues.

This model, in which special-interest foundations establish news organizations that report on funders' interest areas, traditionally has raised several concerns. For health-news consumers, there's the question of whether the coverage is somehow shaped by the interests of the funder. For foundations, there's the loss-of-control issue when a firewall is established between funder and news organization. "This is the first time we'll be funding health information that we're not really controlling," said James.

That these issues have not been prominent in recent months may reflect the starkness of the potential alternative – a vast scaling back, at least in the short term, of health information that consumers need. Said James, "If nonprofits don't find a way to invest in certain kinds of journalism, we're not going to see that journalism anymore... I just don't think there's a model there anymore."

Mark Smith, president and CEO of the California HealthCare Foundation, expects to see more such experiments and collaborations in the future. "I think the growing number of ... projects stems from both sides: the increasingly desperate straits of traditional journalism, and the desire for foundations to influence events by influencing the media."

Community news sites

One of the most promising forms of digital news is the community news site – oftentimes just one or two-person operations that chronicle slices of civic life in hometowns and neighborhoods. And one of the most promising hopes for these news models is the prospect that community and civic foundations might be part of their funding base. Like many things in journalism, this is one of those ideas that would have been laughed away even two years ago. But it's happening with increasing frequency, and some think there's an opportunity for significant growth. Peter Osnos is one of them. The long-term challenge to community news and information, he said, is to establish the position of news organizations as "indispensable civic assets."

One reason this idea has promise is that the Knight Foundation is waging a significant effort to persuade community foundations that they need to start bankrolling news and information in their hometowns. In the first year of a five-year program, Knight put up \$5 million to fund 21 news sites across the country, while participating foundations contributed \$12 million. All told, Knight plans to spend \$24 million over the life of the program. "We're extremely excited about the possibilities here," said Ibarguen. "Community foundations have billions and billions at their disposal. We think more and more of them are going to find that information has become one of their community's core needs."

There are already many examples of community foundations supporting local news sites, with grants big and small. Among the sites: the Gotham Gazette, Voice of San Diego, Twin Cities Daily Planet, MinnPost, Connect SW Alabama, St. Louis Beacon, Chi-Town Daily News, High Country News. Funders go by names like Berks County Community Foundation, the Boston Foundation, the Community Foundation of South Alabama, the Coral Gables Foundation, and so on.

In most cases, these nonprofit sites are receiving revenue from a variety of sources – not just from foundation grants. Many have coalesced around a hybrid model that includes foundation money, NPR-style memberships and advertising sales.

Orville Schell, one of the conveners at the 2008 meeting, said this hybrid style has the best chance of success. “What is needed in the media are forms of support that can be sustaining over the long haul, not just the short haul. This is not philanthropy’s strength.” New media operations that combine some private donations with revenue from the market “make more sense and may be more sturdy and more long-lived,” he said.

Foundations and for-profit news organizations?

One interesting question is whether for-profit news organizations might participate as community foundation recipients. Although tricky, it would not be impossible to set up a framework where foundation money could go to newspapers and broadcast newsrooms to support, for example, specific reporters. Since newspapers have already been beaten to the punch on this by digital journalists, it’s unclear whether they will get in this game. Charlotte Hall, former president of the American Society of News Editors, has already indicated a willingness to consider the idea. “I think one area worthy of

more exploration is foundation support for some functions within existing newsrooms,” she says. “They already have an infrastructure, staff and broad audience to have impact.”

Paul Tash, publisher of the St. Petersburg Times, offers one schematic of how that might happen. The Times is in the unusual position of being owned by a nonprofit, the Poynter Institute. Profits from the newspaper (which are taxed just as at any other newspaper) are used by Poynter to support its training and research institute. “Here’s a hypothetical,” said Tash. “What if we gave to Poynter some part of our Web operation, and made that as an R&D project. A journalistic lab. Even gave some support to it from the St. Petersburg Times. Then Poynter might attract some philanthropic support for it. That, perhaps, could be a model.”

Victor Navasky, publisher emeritus of The Nation, contends that it’s in existing news organizations where foundation dollars can best be used. “The best potential lies in one-offs, rather than attempting to launch permanent, new enterprises,” he said, “and supporting existing institutions with track records.”

Photographer Susan Meiselas said the Magnum Photos agency, with which she is affiliated, has set up foundations in New York and London aimed at finding new ways to support documentary photographers. “There are new models to pursue,” she said, “including partnerships between organizations who have distinct roles in news or in-depth reporting which can be complementary.”



CONCLUSION

The uncertainty about philanthropy’s role in the news ecology of the future hasn’t gone away. Journalism needs long-term, reliable, sustainable funding, and foundations and wealthy donors often have something else in mind. Even so, foundation-funded journalism is likely to keep growing. Why? Because the reporting resources of mainstream news organizations are likely to continue receding. Syracuse University journalism professor Vin Crosbie says we may be entering a “Gray Age” of information, in which the news budgets of legacy media shrink much faster than new business models can be created. If so, the foundation-funded news wave may just be beginning.

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*The Henry J. Kaiser Family
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COMMERCIAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

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Orlando Sentinel

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Kerry Smith

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NOT-FOR-PROFIT NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

Tom Curley

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David Fanning

WGBH

Bill Kling

American Public Media Group

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Thirteen/WNET

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Human Rights Watch

Bill Buzenberg

The Center for Public Integrity

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