

CALIFORNIA WATCH / CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

location: Global (CIR), California (California Watch)

founded: 1977 (CIR), 2009 (California Watch)

web: <http://www.centerforinvestigativereporting.org/> <http://californiawatch.org/>

twitter: @CIRonline @californiawatch

PARTICIPANTS AT MONDAY'S MEETING

Mark Katches, Editorial Director, California Watch

Robert Rosenthal, Executive Director, Center for Investigative Reporting

PART 1: OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose and focus of your organization?

The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) and California Watch are a nonprofit and independent investigative reporting organization that exposes injustice, waste, mismanagement, wrongdoing, questionable practices, and corruption so that those responsible can be held to account and so the public can be armed with the information needed to debate solutions and spark change. California Watch is a project of CIR. CIR focuses on national and global issues while California Watch focuses its work on California. The team at California Watch pursues in-depth, high-impact reporting on issues such as education, public safety, health care and the environment. California Watch reporters also produce stories that hold those in power accountable, while tracking government waste and the mispending of taxpayer resources.

They place a major emphasis on solution-oriented reporting intended to have an impact on the quality of life for Californians and our communities. We plan to engage the public by building and creating interactive tools that make it easier to connect with leaders and decision makers about key issues. And we offer searchable databases through our Data Center and other resources, links and guides that enable anyone to do their own basic watchdog reporting. Nearly all of these strategies are employed on all CIR stories, but its projects may involve direct "one off" media partnerships with such organizations as Frontline. CIR has also just finished, among other ongoing projects, a major documentary called "Dirty Business: Clean Coal and our Energy Future" which is soon to be distributed nationally.

2. How are you different from "traditional" media online?

We distribute our stories as widely as possible through collaborative relationships with local and regional news organizations and through social media. California Watch has established working relationships with California news organizations of all kinds – newspapers, online publications, television, radio, ethnic media and other new forms of media – to help localize and distribute our reporting. We also publish unique, original content on our Web site that isn't available anywhere else.

CIR follows a similar model. For example we have an ongoing project looking at the Carbon offset, Cap and Trade issue. Those stories, by a CIR staff reporter have appeared in Harpers and Mother Jones magazines. There is also a co-branded website called Carbon Watch on the Frontline site. Frontline will air a story with CIR on May 11, and NPR's Market Place has done a two-part series with CIR.

3. What is your financial sustainability plan?

We are developing a diverse, multi-faceted approach at California Watch. It includes generating revenue from the sale of our content, from advertising and corporate sponsorships; from individual donors, and larger foundations. CIR is also following that model which also includes membership and exploring social networking as a potential source of support.

4. What are your most reliable sources of revenue?

We sell our content to news organizations throughout California, which helps generate income and defray the costs of our reporting. But that revenue is still very small and currently our most reliable source of funds comes from foundations, several of whom have made multi-year commitments. We realize we must develop multiple streams to sustain us, and that the quality of our work is our most valuable asset that we must do a better job of leveraging.

5. What are two technological innovations - or services made possible by recent technological innovation - that you've introduced in the delivery of news and information to your readers?

We are frequent users of social media via Facebook and Twitter and we rely heavily on Flickr for our use of creative commons photography. Internally, we use Google Docs and Google Calendar to help organize our work. We have experimented with crowd-sourcing on a limited basis and would like to do more.

6. How effective are you in getting your content to people?

California Watch has distributed to news organizations 17 stories and published more than 500 blog posts since January. We've had more than 50 news partners who have worked with us or have published our work. Our stories have reached at least 13 million newspaper subscribers, and millions more on TV, radio and online. We have collaborated with local TV stations in Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco. We have a strong partnership with KQED Radio to share (50-50 split) a reporter and co-brand radio stories produced by reporter Michael Montgomery.

We have partnered with New America Media to translate stories into Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean and Chinese. La Opinion in Los Angeles has printed nearly all of our stories, translating them into Spanish and allowing us to redistribute that translation for others to use on their sites. We edit multiple versions of our stories to emphasis local content, and we work collaboratively with other news organizations on select stories to highlight local examples and other content that appeals to regional audiences. We produce stories at different lengths that can be used by news organizations with varying news holes. We think our distribution model is one of the things that makes us unique.

We've also created more than 20 searchable databases on our site that help drive traffic to us every day. By blogging 5-8 times each weekday, we are creating a vibrant website that helps complement our enterprise and investigative reports. CIR has a different distribution model. The example of our carbon offset work shows our ability to use a core reporter as an example of how we reach varied and large audiences with highly respected media partners. We also work directly with major news organizations.

7. How do you measure your success?

For California Watch success looks like this: Stories that make a difference and change lives. To do that, we hope to achieve the broadest distribution possible for all of our major stories. All of our major stories include a "React and Act" component that helps engage citizens to address issues raised by our reporting. For CIR it is also about reaching an audience and also getting results when we reveal information that has not previously been brought to light. We have a strategy of pushing all of our stories out to a variety of bloggers, and we have found that this greatly expands the audience and impact of our work.

8. What do you hope to learn or get out of the Austin meeting?

California Watch is a new and ambitious model, and a key part of CIR. By focusing on state and local coverage we are partially meeting a tremendous need. The distribution has been surprisingly successful, now we have to work on sustaining that, creating a strong brand and marketing strategy and look to find ways to sustain the work. We feel that we've tasted early success with California Watch. We're proud of what we're accomplishing and the direction we're headed. But we also have lots of key decisions to make to better define and implement a sustainable business model. We are hoping to learn from our colleagues and peers and take home new ideas and approaches that will help us achieve greater

flexibility in the way we generate revenue. Part of the success of California Watch grows from the strong and highly credible brand and values that CIR created over 33 years.

CIR must be sustained to support and integrate with California Watch. This is a challenge as well as we create strategies for sustainability that do not compete or conflict. We hope to make clear to others what we are doing, share our ambitions and enthusiasm and educate others about what we are doing. We will share best practices with the hope that together we can be part of the solution for high quality journalism in this transformational period.

PART 2: DETAILS ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION

1. What is your technology platform?

We publish online using a Drupal-based content management system. But we collaborate with newspaper, radio, TV and online partners, as well as university journalism schools and ethnic media outlets. We publish audio, video and text as well as multimedia, interactive databases and graphics.

2. Do you share technology platforms and costs with other organizations?

We share with CIR many of the same administrative and management staff. When we collaborate, we emphasize cross-linking and posting to drive traffic to our partners – and vice versa. We publish and broadcast our work online. We charge most of our partners for our content but offer “trades” or discounts when they offer services to us in exchange. For example, our recent story about the questionable spending practices of more than 225 nursing homes in California resulted in collaboration with the Orange County Register, which produced three graphics and photography for the package. In exchange, the Register was able to purchase our material for reduced rate. Several other news organizations ran some or all of the photos and graphics.

3. How many full-time journalists (journalists or editors) do you have?

Today, California Watch employs eight full-time reporters, editors and multimedia producers. But we have posted four more full-time positions. We have a very diverse staff in terms of gender and race. Overall, CIR and California Watch has a staff of 22 and that will soon be 26.

4. How many part-time journalists or freelancers do you retain?

We have three additional part-time employees on our California Watch staff today. CIR employs several other part-timers. We are likely to hire at least one more. We have worked with more than a dozen freelancers and about 75 university journalism students since launching in the fall of 2009.

5. What is the percentage breakdown of revenue by sources?

Today, probably 90 percent of our revenue comes from foundations. The rest comes from two major individual gifts, small and mid-level donations, content sales and advertising. Our goal is to reduce our reliance on foundations over time but in the next three to five years we will be greatly dependent on them. We would like to reduce our reliance on foundations but it is very unclear whether we will ever be totally self sustainable. The arena is very fluid though and discussion are now on the table that were not out there even two years ago.

6. Without foundation support, what would your organization look like?

CIR would probably still be here. But California Watch would not exist. We launched California Watch with the generous support of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We have since raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from other foundations, including the California Endowment, and additional sources. CIR is also funded for the most part by foundations. CIR and California Watch are now working aggressively to come up with a business plan. One trend that has helped is that some foundations are now more comfortable with multi-year core support grants.