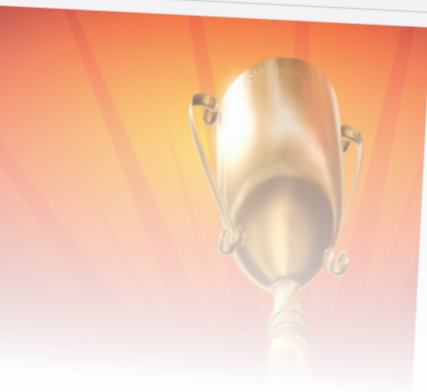




Featured Story



Non-Profit Journalists Honored At Capitol Reporting Awards

Franklin Center Captures First Journalism Award
Alexandria, VA – Capitolbeat, the national Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors, honored two of the Franklin Center's networked reporters with awards at Capitolbeat's annual conference in Arizona this weekend.

MarylandReporter.com's coverage of state government won two awards while the Online In-depth Reporting Award winner was Kevin Lee, reporter at Illinois Statehouse News ...

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The New *Watchdogs*

Franklin Center Builds Nationwide Network of Investigative Reporters

By Robert B. Bluey

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Who We Are

Jim Scarantino was browsing the government's economic stimulus Web site last year when he did a double take. As the editor of New Mexico Watchdog, Scarantino was keeping tabs on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's impact on his state.

Recovery.gov, the government's official source for data on jobs created or saved, reported \$8.96 million was spent in New Mexico's 35th District. There was just one problem. New Mexico has only three congressional representatives.

"When I saw the page listing the top five congressional districts, I knew I had a story.

We only have three," Scarantino explained. "It was like shooting fish in a barrel. It was such a ludicrous error. It's the kind of thing investigative reporters love to get a hold of because it makes fools out of arrogant, pretentious government bureaucrats."

Scarantino broke the story and immediately notified a network of reporters from across the country working for similar Watchdog outlets. They, too, found erroneous entries on the government's Web site. Phantom congressional districts became a national story, even catching the attention of Stephen Colbert on his faux news show on Comedy Central.

Scarantino's scoop is exactly the type of reporting the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity was hoping would make headlines when it set out in 2008 to train scores of investigative journalists in nearly all 50 states. Watchdog news outlets began to sprout as traditional media shed jobs, particularly costly investigative positions.

Today the Franklin Center has expanded its outlook to state capitol bureaus, another

vide its partners with support, training, and legal advice, enabling their reporters to spend time in the field producing news content.

Many have found a home at free-market think tanks across the country. Scarantino, for instance, works for the Rio Grande Foundation in New Mexico. Another reporter, Kathy Hoekstra, is based at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan.

Hoekstra, who previously held a television

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casualty for budget-cutting media companies. From 2003 to 2009, statehouse reporters declined from 524 positions to 355—a 30 percent drop. In smaller states, that might leave just one reporter covering the state capitol.

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“State by state and at the national level, these reporters are having an impact on the daily debate,” said Jason Stverak, Franklin's president. “We needed investigative reporters 50 years ago, 100 years ago, and we'll need them into the future. There needs to be an aggressive watchdog on government.”

Stverak has a background in political organizing as the former executive director of the North Dakota Republican Party. Those skills have helped Franklin grow quickly and pro-

vide its partners with support, training, and legal advice, enabling their reporters to spend time in the field producing news content.

“It adds another dimension to the work the Mackinac Center is already doing to broaden the debate through its objective analysis of Michigan issues,” Hoekstra said. “By reporting on stories that expose government waste, fraud, and abuse, the Mackinac Center shines an even greater light on government operations and enables residents to hold their elected officials and government bureaucrats accountable for their use of taxpayer money.”

Hoekstra made waves with an exposé on liberal filmmaker Michael Moore last year. Cleverly called “Michael and Me”—a title inspired by one of Moore's films—Hoekstra used her broadcast talents to reveal that Moore got taxpayer funding for a movie he was filming in Michigan. Given the state's dire economy, it sparked outrage. The celebrity-focused Perez Hilton blog linked to her report,



exposing the Mackinac Center to an unlikely audience.

Stverak takes great pride in stories like Scarantino's and Hoekstra's because they broke through the saturated news environment.

"There is more and more of a vacuum of real information about what is going on in government and in communities," he said.

That is why Franklin is expanding to state capitol bureaus. Stverak wants to fill the empty chairs with reporters who can keep a watchful eye on state governments. Today the organization has about 34 reporters in capitol bureaus in more than 20 states, with more on the horizon.

"We work with reporters who are former scientists, attorneys, forensic accountants," Stverak said. "They're not trained journalists, but they're practicing journalistic endeavors with the highest level of integrity and standards."

They cover a variety of topics, but spending is a regular focus. StateHouseNewsOnline.com serves as an aggregator, featuring the work of independent journalists covering state-specific and local government activity.

Despite its growing success, not everyone is a fan of the Franklin Center's work. Politicians and government bureaucrats who prefer secrecy don't care to have reporters looking over their shoulder.

Then there is the backlash from traditional media outlets that face competition from aggressive reporters hungry for scoops. When journalists aren't griping about these upstart outlets behind the scenes, they're getting their allies to do it for them.

This fall, the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University attacked the Franklin Center for accepting tax-deductible donations as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Franklin accepts no government funding for its work, but Nieman's Jim Barnett argued that tax-deductible donations were tantamount to federal aid. The piece

read like a typical liberal rant with the sole purpose of questioning Franklin's credibility.

Stverak and his colleagues at Franklin recognize the threat they pose to traditional media outlets that want to maintain their monopoly on the news.

"Obviously, there is skepticism coming from some in the traditional legacy media, but that's not who we work and write for," Stverak said. "We write for the people, and the content that we produce is at such a high-quality level that it is continually being embraced by the consumers in each community."

As he recounted the story on phantom congressional districts, Scarantino heaped praise on the Franklin Center for the opportunity to serve as his own assignment editor. That allowed him to pursue the best story rather than follow the pack. Because of the 24/7 news cycle, some reporters don't have that freedom.

"I couldn't have done this without the Franklin Center," Scarantino said. "They gave me the luxury of time to actually read and investigate, throw my net wide and run wherever my interests and suspicions led."

With that approach, Franklin is devoted to expanding the number of investigative reporters. Stverak said he believes we're in an era when investigative reporting can flourish.

"It goes back to the phantom congressional districts story," he explained. "You had the government's own transparency Web site that couldn't even get the correct number of congressional districts. It's up to these reporters to ensure the dollars being spent on our behalf as citizens are being spent in the correct way."

Someone has to do it. And given its early success, the Franklin Center appears up to the task.

Mr. Bluey directs the Center for Media and Public Policy, an investigative journalism operation at The Heritage Foundation.