

**IRE Board of Directors Meeting  
Philadelphia, PA  
June 2015**

**In Attendance:** Sarah Cohen, Josh Meyer, Phil Williams, T Christian Miller, Ziva Branstetter, Matt Goldberg, Jill Riepenhoff, Len Downie Jr., David Cay Johnston, Andy Donohue, Ellen Gabler **Via Phone:** Chrys Wu, Nicole Vap

**Staff In Attendance:** Mark Horvit, Tricia Morgan

Wu made a motion to approve the minutes. Goldberg seconded.

The board voted unanimously in favor.

**Executive Directors Report:**

Horvit introduced several new employees: Alex Richards, Anthony Debarros and Tricia Morgan.

He said that this year's conference will be the largest IRE has ever held, with more than 1,700 attendees pre-registered. Combined with NICAR, that means that IRE's conferences have drawn more than 2,700 people in 2015. He talked about several things being done to commemorate IRE's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the conference, including a video put together by Williams that will be shown at the luncheon, and the giving of the first Founders Award to Don Barlett and Jim Steele.

Horvit said membership ended May at a record high of more than 5,700; (with the dropoff to begin July IRE is still at 5,200, much higher than in past years). Downie about what was driving some of the numbers. Horvit talked about several factors, including the involvement of several companies in the IRE Conference, including Gannett, Scripps and NBC.

Horvit discussed how the growth in IRE's events, particularly the NICAR Conference, has created much more work for the staff, explaining that Morgan's position was created to help Stephanie Sinn oversee events. The board thanked the IRE staff for its efforts and work in putting together the conference and managing the larger numbers.

Horvit talked about new features on the web site and thanked Sarah Hutchins for her work on the site and IRE's social media efforts. Meyer asked if there were specific drivers for the web traffic. And Horvit said that traffic is spread out across various portions of the site. He noted that Wu had helped him realize a few years ago that making some of our resources publicly available would help drive interest. He said the new podcast, available to all (not just members), is part of the effort to raise awareness of the organization. Donohue asked how web traffic compares to other similar organizations. Horvit said he wasn't sure, but that the fact that most of IRE's site is still members only makes it hard to compare. He also said that it is now possible to reach audio on the site, which should increase use of the old conference audio.

Horvit and board members talked about the benefits of the ongoing Watchdog Workshop program for outreach and training. The program is funded by the Ethics & Excellence in Journalism Foundation. Horvit said the Total Newsroom Training (TNT) program received

increased funding for a third year, thanks to the family foundation that supports it. Horvit noted that the staff continues to work on a map for the website that helps to illustrate IRE's reach and impact.

Horvit said IRE is doing several workshops in Hong Kong and China, funded by a variety of sources. He also discussed the Course Packs, a new program overseen by Jaimi Dowdell with contributions from much of the staff that professors can use to teach introductory data journalism to their students. This spring was the launch of the program, with several classes across the country trying it out. Williams asked about distance training, and Horvit said that one reason he hired Alex Richards was to free Dowdell up to focus more on online training.

Horvit updated the status of the online Board election, saying that so far the numbers are down from last year. That's not surprising with half the candidates, he said. Speeches have been moved from the Saturday membership meeting to Friday right after the showcase, with a goal of having a bigger audience. Discussion ensued on the best ways to make sure everyone knew about the election and the balloting process.

Horvit discussed Liz Lucas' plans for the data library, including plans to better package and market data. Sales of data continue to drop, while analysis jobs have remained slow but steady. If jobs come in that the library isn't trained to handle, effort will be made to build a small group of members who are interested in doing some extra work, with revenue sharing. Lucas and Denise Malan also have done much research on potential new platforms to host and deliver data. Cohen praised the plans. Donohue asked what metrics can be used to gauge success. Horvit said interest in the data and the library's offerings are one measure. Lengthy discussion ensued about the data operations, ways to measure success and other matters. Horvit noted that the data library is a partnership with the University of Missouri and that the training we offer graduate students is part of our arrangement with the school.

Discussion then moved to DocumentCloud. Horvit gave an update on usage and plans to work on sustainability, with Cohen, Downie and others suggesting that a longer discussion of the plans for the platform's future take place at the upcoming Board retreat. Miller said that he has been kept informed on overall plans through his role on DocumentCloud's Advisory Committee. Among the topics that were brought up during a discussion of the platform were what to do with accounts that are inactive, organizations that store many documents that are not public on the platform, traffic and use (discussed by Ted Han and Anthony Debarros), legal issues that have been dealt with, and other details. Horvit said much of the focus will be on ways to generate income and how to do that using both our journalist base and nonjournalists.

Horvit thanked Han for all of the work he put in before there was a team to support him; the board applauded. And Cohen thanked the DocumentCloud team for the work they've done to date.

Discussion then moved to other issues, including the upcoming IRE and NICAR conference schedules. They are:

2016: NICAR in Denver, IRE in New Orleans

2017: NICAR in Jacksonville, Fla., IRE in Phoenix.

Horvit said Sinn is looking into locations for future years. Discussion ensued on various cities that might make sense. There was general agreement that IRE move back East for 2018. Cohen asked if Sinn and Horvit are planning on the conferences remaining this size. They replied that we must plan for larger crowds while also being careful not to overcommit. Horvit said that there's no way to predict how attendance will be in future years, noting that locations like Phoenix are likely to draw a smaller crowd than an East Coast city like Philadelphia. Discussion ensued, including the role of companies like Gannett, Scripps and NBC in bringing larger groups to the IRE Conference for training purposes. A long list of cities was recommended as possible locations for future events. The board thanked Sinn for all of her work on handling the increased growth in the conferences.

### **IRE BUDGET:**

Horvit noted that the budget proposal was presented to the board on a previous conference call. He went over the highlights. Horvit noted that IRE will end the current fiscal year with more money than anticipated, the third year in a row that revenue has exceeded projections.

There was brief discussion following the presentation.

MOTION: Williams made a motion to adopt the 2015-16 budget; Goldberg seconded. The board voted unanimously in favor.

### **RESERVE FUND POLICY**

Donohue presented research he has conducted into options for adopting a policy to govern IRE's reserve fund. He discussed the importance of building reserves to help in hard financial times, and talked about various possible approaches he looked into. He said the current reserve fund has \$250,000. When available unspent funds in the endowment, and cash on hand are added to this, the total available is \$393,000. This represents about 3 months in operations funding. He said experts recommend having between 3-6 months in reserves.

Donohue said the recommended proposal calls for maintaining a fund with a minimum of three months of funding, and a ceiling of six months. Each year the executive director would take any funds that remain at the end of a fiscal year and put 50 percent of those into reserves until that ceiling is met. Cohen asked that, if disaster hit, would the board still have to maintain that 3-month level? Donohue said that in such a case the board would meet and authorize the executive director to withdraw money if necessary.

Donohue noted that the board can separately tackle whether it wants to invest any of its Reserve Fund, which now generates little interest but is kept safe. IRE's accountant suggested that such a move be considered, though he did not give an opinion of whether the board should do so.

Downie praised Donohue's research and recommendations for the reserve fund.

MOTION: Johnston makes a motion: The IRE Board adopts a Reserve Fund Policy calling for a Fund with a goal of a minimum of three months, and a maximum of six months, of operating revenue. Downie seconds. The board votes unanimously in favor.

Donohue said that, going forward, the executive director is directed to put 50 percent of any excess revenue into the reserve fund each year until the six-month goal is hit.

3:45 p.m. 4 p.m. Break

## **VIDEO ARCHIVE PROJECT**

Lea spent several minutes summarizing her research, referring to the extensive handouts that she prepared.

She described three options with a range of prices, all of which are preliminary. The most expensive would have a total cost of about \$800,000 and would be completely handled by a third party. The middle option would involve others doing the preservation but IRE administering the collection. The third would involve IRE buying the necessary equipment and doing the work itself. This is the cheapest option.

Thompson said she spoke to various organizations that IRE could partner with, but none of those options ultimately looks viable, for a variety of reasons. She said she has compiled a list of potential funders, but there are some issues board members would need to consider, including whether IRE would accept government funding.

Discussion followed, including questions about whether the fundraising for this project would compete with other IRE fundraising, especially if government money is not sought. Problems with working with the Library of Congress – once considered an option – also were discussed including whether the material would actually be catalogued or simply warehoused. Thompson was asked what the demand to see the video would be; she said she was not sure. Thompson was asked whether funders would want the video to be available to the general public as opposed to simply IRE members; she said that was likely. Discussion then moved to the costs involved, including the ongoing costs of storing the material. Thompson said she has estimated out costs for 10 years; storage costs would continue beyond that.

Thompson was asked for her recommendation. She said she leans toward the most expensive option, to have others do the work with existing expertise. Discussion then focused on how much the archive would be used. Some members questioned how much it would be utilized; others said its historic value makes saving it a priority.

Cohen said that it sounds like a topic that cannot be resolved during this meeting and discussion turned to creating a small committee to work with Thompson on exploring the options further. Thompson noted that Goldberg and Stuart Watson already are on a committee for that purpose. Cohen suggested that a subcommittee continue to work on this and that it be discussed further at the upcoming retreat. Vap volunteered to join the committee.

Goldberg made a motion to have a subcommittee explore funding options that do not compete with current IRE funding; Vap seconded. The vote was unanimous in favor.

## **Membership Requirements:**

Horvit said he wanted to ask the Board whether a committee should review IRE's current membership requirements to see if any modifications are necessary. Cohen noted that the staff has to wrestle with a growing number of applicants who fall into gray areas. She stressed that today's conversation is not meant to dig into who is and is not a journalist for the purposes of IRE membership.

Horvit noted that some cases have arisen that have been hard for him and Membership Coordinator Amy Johnston to make quick determinations on whether they qualify. One recent example was the request by many members of Project Veritas to join and attend the conference. Horvit said they were all allowed to join and attend, but because of the group's activist nature, the decision took some thought and research. Another request came from an analyst for the Census who does data work much like journalists do and who claimed he wrote a blog. (He was not approved because his writing could not be confirmed). There are many other similar cases, he said. Miller asked if there was legal exposure to turning people down. Horvit said no, but we need to have clear rules we can rely on. Johnston said he supported a wide-open interpretation of membership requirements. Williams supported having a board committee look at the issue and provide guidance. Cohen said such decisions are taking up staff time. Gabler said it might be good to address the questions now before it becomes a larger problem.

Gabler and Riepenhoff agreed that they could help look into the issues.

## **MEMBER SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT**

Gabler said that the ongoing program to have members sponsor students has worked very well, with more than 450 students sponsored by about 200 members. She said a separate drive was started to try to encourage colleges and universities to sponsor student attendance at the IRE Conference. That program was less successful, but about 40 students were sent by eight schools. Part of the problem may be that the IRE Conference occurs when schools are out of session for the summer. She also discussed the ongoing success of the meetups being held in many cities. Gabler also said she has asked Horvit to complete and publicize a report on IRE's diversity efforts, to both make it clear what the group is doing and to encourage more ideas. Cohen thanked the committee for all of its work.

## **CONTEST COMMITTEE**

Branstetter said it becoming harder and harder for screeners and judges to work with the student category, because of the continually blurring lines between student and professional work, and the large operations that bring together teams of students versus small student publication efforts. Riepenhoff said she screened the student category and said much of the work entered ran in professional publications or was produced by such teams. Cohen noticed that these problems have been coming up for several years.

Discussion ensued into various ways this could be dealt with. Branstetter also noted that there are some issues with the radio category that should be considered, with large organizations crowding out small ones each year. Others questioned whether having five finalists in each

category is too many. Horvit noted that it is a maximum, not a minimum, and that fewer can be put forth by screeners.

Branstetter said she would meet with the Contest Committee and bring recommended changes in these areas back to the Board for consideration. Horvit said it couldn't wait for the fall retreat, because of the need to prepare for the contest, so it was agreed that a conference call would be held in August.

## **FREELANCE JOURNALIST PROPOSAL**

Horvit said IRE serves as a fiscal sponsor for an effort called Project Word, which has the goal of providing support and resources for freelance investigative journalists. Because IRE has 501c3 status and Project Word does not, IRE can get and process grants on behalf of Project Word. We keep a very small percentage for administrative costs. We have done this for several other projects run by IRE members over the past few years.

Project Word's founder, Laird Townsend, received funding to survey freelance investigative journalists and determine their greatest needs. He is now seeking funding based on the results of that survey. He would like to publicize the connection with IRE as part of this effort. Horvit says he favors working with Townsend on this.

Townsend arrived at the meeting and discussed some of his goals. Horvit said that among those are getting funding to provide grant support to freelancers working on investigative projects, and funding training sessions in data and other skills for these journalists. He also plans to look into support for things like legal help and insurance. He also said he is interested in providing some kind of "seal of approval" that would help give freelancers credibility.

Downie questioned the idea of having another organization within IRE. Meyer asked how these efforts are different than those of other organizations that help freelancers. Townsend said he would focus on things that are not duplicative. Downie questioned whether some of the items on Townsend's list are a good fit for IRE. Donohue asked if this effort would put extra work on Horvit or other IRE staff. Horvit and Townsend said that IRE would not get involved in any of these efforts if there was not funding to cover them and to staff them if necessary. Meyer said there is a need to help freelancers.

Downie asked Horvit to continue working with Townsend and to come up with a plan the Board can look at in the future.

## **IRE STAFF ORGANIZATION**

Horvit said he has been asked in the past by the board to look at IRE's overall structure and to consider creating an associate director position. As he has told the Board previously, he instead redrew the staff structure and created two new positions that have administrative roles, the Director of Training and the Director of Events. Those positions are held by Jaimi Dowdell and Stephanie Sinn, respectively. Each position has several positions that report to it. Both of those positions report to the executive director, as do some other positions. Horvit said he included an

organization chart in each board member's packet of information. He also said that Amy Johnston now oversees membership, and Tricia Morgan is helping with events planning.

Cohen asked if Horvit was cutting back on his travel schedule. He said he has worked to do that over the past six months. Hiring Alex Richards as a third trainer should continue to help.

Donohue noted that IRE no longer has a position devoted to development, and asked whether IRE is leaving money on the table as a result. Horvit said that if he could find the right person to help with development it could be good, but that in reality most of the fundraising has been done by him, with the development position focused on tracking the grants and helping with reporting. Getting the right person would likely mean finding someone outside Columbia and would require significantly more than IRE has paid in the past, he said. Downie noted that oftentimes the most effective fundraising comes from someone passionate about an organization's role, which is why the executive director can be effective.

Johnston asked if Horvit feels like he needs a No. 2. Horvit said he believes the new structure fills much of that need and would like to continue to try this model.

Cohen asked that if another position were created, could it take some work off of Horvit's plate? He said it could, but with all the changes he'd like to see how things work first.

The Board then voted to go into closed session to discuss Horvit's annual review at 5:30 p.m., which is a personnel matter.

The Board reconvened at about 5:50 p.m. and adjourned.