



“Outing the Corporations” Investigative Reporting Proposal

Application Deadline: July 1

Return to: erin@themediaconsortium.com

Application Length Limit: 4 pages

Name: Hanaa Rifaey / Lark Corbeil

Title: Publisher / Founder & CEO

Organization: American Independent News Network / Public News Service

Will you be responsible for overseeing the program at your organization? Yes, for both

If no, please enter name and title here: N/A

If you have read and agree to the requirements to the program, please mark X here: X

1. Why is your organization interested in reporting on the topic of corporate influence on our democracy?

350 words or less

Thomas Jefferson famously said that if he had the choice between living in a nation with a government but no newspapers and a nation with newspapers but no government, he would gladly choose the latter. Journalism, particularly investigative journalism, plays a crucial role in safeguarding democracy by keeping the government honest and holding those in power accountable.

The rise of the Internet as the primary source of news in America, eclipsing newspapers, radio, and television, provides a historic opportunity to investigate and hold accountable these independent interest groups at both the national and state levels. The American Independent News Network's aim is to provide thorough investigative reporting on these political organizations and the increased exchange of money and the inherent pay-to-play system that flourishes in this environment. Our seasoned reporters will use the tools of their trade, from researching donor disclosure forms and other relevant documents, to developing sources inside these interest groups, which, given their lack of public disclosure, is an essential ingredient to lifting the veil of secrecy that surrounds money and politics.

Those who hold the biggest microphones already dominate public debate. It's difficult to stomach what passes for a "national conversation." *Citizens United* allows corporate interests to 'drop the big drills' and pound on public perceptions, or should we say "drill" their messages into every head. PNS addresses these issues generally; and we dearly want and need the resources to tackle the *Citizens United* decision specifically. Much more support is needed: every single bit is necessary. Collectively, AINN/PNS' goal is to increase transparency for actions that otherwise will occur in secret, and ensure that the public is informed, so that all citizens may engage in a free and fair debate about the future direction of the country.

2. Has your organization reported on this topic in the past?

Yes X, for both

No _____

If so, please share headlines and links to past reporting over past year

AINN: Please see below for AINN's reported pieces that have had an impact on the public debate and advanced the common good. A full list of AINN's reports is available upon request, as AINN has generated hundreds of pieces related to this topic.

AINN questions legality of two anti-equality groups spending during election season; leads to formal complaint being filed

[Complaint: Nat'l Organization for Marriage, Family Council violated lobbying laws](#)

[NOM's anti-gay marriage ad muddles MLK's pro-gay message](#)

[Anti-Koering ads raise question: Should NOM be registered with campaign finance board?](#)

Watchdog group files IRS complaint against nonprofit with "strong ties" to GOP

[Greiner will remain president of American Future Fund](#)

[Groups call on Greiner to resign from American Future Fund](#)

[Group calls for IRS investigation of American Future Fund](#)

Equality Coalition cites The Washington Independent's investigation in national call to action

[In Wake of Ballot Initiatives, Questions About the National Organization for Marriage's Funding](#)

Additionally, two stories in particular best exemplify AINN's successes in this topic area:

1. In Minnesota, AINN revealed that the 2010 Republican candidate for governor, Tom Emmer, had funded an extreme evangelical group whose leader, we also discovered, advocates capital punishment for gay people. When confronted by our reporters, Emmer refused to condemn this position, and called the leaders behind this group "nice people." Consequently, this led to a national boycott of Target and Best Buy, both of which had donated to the conservative PAC MN Forward, which purchased ads with the funds on Tom Emmer's behalf. The boycotts occurred because these retailers supported Tom Emmer's candidacy with political donations while expecting gay people to also shop there. Because Emmer refused to repudiate the group, his popularity spiraled downward as he revealed his true position as a right wing ideologue.

2. When AINN learned that Colorado gubernatorial candidate Scott McInnis had been paid \$300,000 by a foundation to author a paper on water quality, AINN asked to read the paper, suspecting a shady sweetheart deal (writers don't get \$300,000 to write papers on water quality). McInnis said "No." The Denver Post editorialized his refusal, asking what he had to hide. The foundation relented and released the paper, which was revealed to be plagiarized from the writings of a judge. McInnis' reputation was destroyed.

Public News Service

In the fall of 2010 PNS collaborated on a media campaign with The Media Consortium. PNS produced and distributed 32 stories in 19 states based on reporting from TMC members that was picked up by 700 other media outlets and reached an audience of over 3 million. View the story log: <http://bit.ly/jVst8o>

In addition to participating in this campaign PNS has covered issues relating to the "Citizens United" U.S. Supreme Court ruling with member supporters in WA, WY, and MT and the 3 stories in 3 states were picked up by a combined total of 133 other media outlets and reached a conservative estimated audience size of over 185,095. View the story log: <http://bit.ly/ke55m2>

This story log is a good snapshot of PNS coverage this past year with Citizen United mentions (duplicated from 2 links above); 12 stories with combined pickup from 1057 media outlets, 1865 web hits, reaching a conservative estimated audience size of over 3,102,033. View the story log: <http://bit.ly/mF0Hq>

3. Please provide a brief outline of a) the likely topic(s) that your media organization(s) would focus on and why. Let us know what scoop you hope to uncover, scandal you hope to lay bare, or top-secret information you want to blow up.

The AINN team will investigate state-level elections and legislation that examines these issues at the state and federal levels and how they influence each other. A handful of 'project pitches' are below:

- **Cable TV Executives in Colorado** — Colorado has long been home to some of the largest cable (TV) companies in the world, with some of the highest paid senior executives in the country residing in the state -- some of them bringing home annual salaries as high as 9 figures. These executives stay below the radar and rarely make

the news for any reason beyond quarterly reports and high salaries. Are they bigger players politically than they are known to be?

- **The U.S. Sugar/Fanjul Family** — The Fanjul family is well known for granting large sums of money to both sides of the political spectrum and for keeping close friends near the White House. Payoff comes in the form of very light regulation of what the industry is doing to the Florida Everglades, as well as government preservation land purchases that reward the companies for their poor environmental stewardship.
- **Anti-Trust/DOJ/USDA** — The time frame of the TMC project will coincide with the national report from the series of anti-trust hearings on agriculture. AINN's Iowa site, The Iowa Independent, has an extensive investigative history on these issues, and will be closely looking into the report.
- **The Coors Family** — To whom is the Coors family and corporation providing financial support? The long-time prominent family in Colorado has been subject to several boycotts over the years as a result of union busting and is currently in the news for firing an employee who was a medical marijuana patient.
- **610 South Blvd., Tampa** — A notorious address in Florida politics, this CPA was the on-paper home of 60-plus PACs, 527s, 501(c)(4)s, etc. last year, acting as a pass-through for millions of dollars that ended up being spent in races nationwide, including in Nevada and New York. Independent gubernatorial candidate Bud Chiles last year called the place the home of "legal money laundering" and one of the ultimate symbols of corruption in Florida.
- **Georgia-Pacific** — The company is currently pushing forward plans to construct a North Florida pipeline to divert waste from a small nearby creek that is already damaged beyond repair into the larger (and more environmentally and commercially vital) St. Johns River. Heading northward, in Minnesota, the plant is one of several entities run by Koch Industries that go largely unnoticed (others include refineries, and fertilizer and coal companies). We will look at whether they are involved in trying to influence environmental policies here.

A complete list of editorial pitches on this topic is available upon request.

4. Please provide a sketch of how your organization(s) would produce the investigative piece(s):

The reporter dedicated to this project will be required to produce at least 50 news items between the time period beginning September 19 and ending November 2, 2011 (which breaks down to 1.5 pieces /work week day). The reporter will be managed by The American Independent's Managing Editor, John Amick, who is overseen by AINN's Executive Editor, Blake de Pastino, through daily strategic editorial meetings. Weekly reviews will ensure the project is on track in terms of both the qualitative and quantitative success. Additional support will be supplied by AINN's Publishing Department, which is responsible for tracking the network's coverage and making sure it is seen by stakeholders and influentials at both the state and national level, in addition to other media outlets.

PNS will radio broadcast three of AINN's 'hardest hitting' pieces, spread evenly over the 6-week period of this grant. AINN/PNS will co-produce a final wrap-up podcast at the end of the grant period that will be aired by PNS, as well as on AINN's news sites. Each piece will also be distributed in multi-formats to all radio, TV and print outlets in a given state through PNS/SBS and border markets, and promoted via Twitter and distributed to any pertinent online outlets and blogs.

5. Please provide a simple budget breakdown in a separate document clarifying what resources you will invest on reporting, production and impact. It's OK to produce a 2-scenario budget (low-end and high-end). You may use the accompanying form or provide one of your own.

Please see page 5.

6. Please provide a quick snapshot of your audience:

Size: (i.e. print, online, viewers, listeners e-list, twitter followers, Facebook fans, etc...)

AINN: AINN has an average online audience of over 804,000 monthly readers. Additionally, for every page view online, AINN measures 23 additional offline impressions on TV, radio or printed newspapers. This is an indication of our ability to drive a larger news cycle. AINN also has a network-wide e-list totaling 8,421, as of May 31, 2011. AINN sites have, in total, 5,002 facebook fans/people who 'like' our sites and 13,739 twitter followers.

PNS: Currently, tens of thousands of media outlets – across every platform – receive PNS' content and more than 7,000 nationally are regularly using its stories, reaching a combined audience of 24 million weekly through

radio and TV broadcasters, online, print and social media. The majority of that is major market news/ talk audience (such as clear channel or CBS). Another strong component is suburban radio, TV & print outlets followed by greater numbers of outlets but reduced audience in rural radio & TV & print markets. Stories are tweeted, reposted on hundreds of other websites and viewed on the PNS web page alone 100s of 1,000s of times.

Geographic Distribution: One of the greatest benefits of AINN is its platform of news sites across the country that are able to share best practices from state to state, ensuring that innovations are transferred throughout the network. While coverage can begin on a local level, AINN's national site, The American Independent, can provide coverage of national organizations and interests, increasing the breadth of our reach. Through Quantcast, AINN is able to break down the geographic regions from which the majority of traffic to our sites is coming (top 12, in descending order): California, Michigan, Florida, Texas, New York, Minnesota, Colorado, Illinois, Ohio, Washington, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

PNS' also has a national geographical reach, with deep concentrations in 33 states.

Demographics: The core audience for the American Independent News Network are people who are especially engaged in state politics and news, such as progressive activists and organizational leaders, elected officials and their staffs, lobbyists, members of the traditional media (producers, editors, reporters) and "news mavens" who closely follow daily news. We track this through word of mouth and I.P. addresses, which tell us where the reader is coming from (e.g. the state capitol). 96 percent of our audience members are between the ages of 18-50+ (17% 18-34; 31% 35-49; 48% 50+), highly educated, and largely affluent.

Similar to the Associated Press, PNS provides content that other media outlets can take from and repackage themselves as well as use PNS stories verbatim if they choose. PNS also distributes to an extensive list of local and national progressive activists and foundations and a considerable number of PNS members have PNS widgets on their websites. Anecdotally activists have told us when they have meetings with their legislators, it is clear that these policy makers have seen or heard PNS stories.

7. Please provide a brief overview of your Public Relations capabilities, including social networking strategies/opportunities, press and ally relationships/contacts and what you could do to promote your reporting.

AINN: As a news organization, AINN does not engage in any advocacy work. Given that we are not advocates, all we can do is share information back and forth. By putting relevant stories into the hands of people who can take action on these stories, both at the state and national level, we are furthering our reach and potential for impact. AINN's publishing department ensures that other stakeholders (advocacy organizations, public officials, and other third parties) take appropriate action based on the news we break. In contrast to the mainstream media, which often does accountability reporting and then hopes that others will act on it, we both break the news and drive impact.

Examples of organizations with whom AINN has developed strategic, symbiotic relationships are: the ACLU, America Votes, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Center for American Progress, Change.org, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, Democracy Now, Environment Florida, Equality Matters, Free Speech TV, Freedom to Marry, GLAAD, NARAL, People for the American Way, Public News Service, Planned Parenthood, Progress Now, the Sierra Club, and many more. For the organizations that operate national and state affiliate offices, AINN has close relationships with both.

PNS: In contrast to most other media outlets, our strategy and strength is white-branding, meaning elevating public interest content through thousands of other media outlets. We measure our success by other outlet pickup however, having said that, every story is tweeted/retweeted/reposted under the PNS brand hundreds of times. In 2010, the news services produced over 4,500 stories featuring public interest messages that ran at least 229,000 times. Now celebrating our 15th year, PNS is a growing network of independent state-based news services trusted by thousands of outlets and supported by hundreds of memberships, grants, & gifts in 33 states where we have member supported news services.

8. Do you have a reporter already on staff or a freelancer identified that covers this beat?

If so, please note their name: Because money in politics is a theme that weaves through every issue AINN covers, every one of our eight editors and 17 reporters has covered this beat to some degree in their time at our network. We anticipate this continuing through this project, as this has been discussed at length with our editorial team. This being said, this project will allow for us to hire a freelance editorial assistant to help dig further into first-source materials to

allow our reporters in each of the states to have even more with which to work, in addition to doing writing of his/her own for The American Independent. Money in politics, mystery money, the effects of *Citizens United*, etc. are all topics that both AINN and PNS will be covering throughout the 2012 cycle; added funding through projects like this allow for us to scale this coverage up.

Sample Budget Document

Please fill in this worksheet as a part of your application.

<u>REVENUE</u>		NOTES
Requested amount (between \$2500-\$7500)	\$7,500	
Other funding	N/A	Other dedicated funding your organization can apply to this project *please see below
In-kind*	\$15,150**	How much in your own resources you will put towards this project
TOTAL REVENUE:	\$22,650	
How many pieces will you produce?	At minimum, 50 (1.5/ week day)	
<u>EXPENSES</u>		NOTES
		Please detail expenses out for the work you will produce. Feel free to add/subtract line items.
Content Creation		Detail out costs for content creator(s)
Reporter	\$2,750	
Graphic Journo	\$N/A	
Production		Please account for all production costs \$500/piece
Radio Production	\$2,000	
Editing	\$1,000	
Web Designer	\$0	e.g. create "popup" graphic for website
Promotion		Allocate % time for social media staff e.g. if you create extra content for promo (such as video, audio, etc.)
Social Media Promotions	\$950	
Additional Materials	\$0	
Other Expenses (please detail out)	\$800	Technology costs and G&A
TOTAL	\$7,500	

*** We know your total costs will be more than are covered by the grant. Getting a snapshot of full costs will help us fundraise in the future--TMC**

*Our issue-specific coverage is currently supported by general operating support funds. AINN has 33 foundation and individual general operating supporters, whose funding is disbursed evenly across AINN's programs, and make up 35 percent of the budget. Additionally, AINN is currently awaiting response from the Glaser Progress Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for additional funding of government accountability and campaign finance reform / *Citizens United* coverage.

**PNS will provide in-kind resources valued at \$2,500 for distributing and localizing in all 50 states as appropriate (33 states where PNS has a news service and in the remaining 17 states working with our partner Soundbite Services). Additionally, while AINN will have a dedicated reporter covering this issue, our other reporters within the network will also be investigating and reporting on this project in order to enhance coverage. We can estimate an additional \$12,650 being spent on this project over the course of the grant period (each story AINN produces costs approximately \$308. At 50 pieces, the total spent [on reporting hours] will be \$15,400.)