



No Story Too Big, No Subject Too Powerful

2014 ProPublica Annual Report



The Mission

To expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.



“Segregation Now”

No Story Too Big, No Subject Too Powerful

The topics of ProPublica’s investigations varied widely in 2014, as they always do. But when the year had ended, one theme stood out: ProPublica had taken on stories most news organizations won’t touch because they are too complex, too expensive, or too legally risky.

Questions had long swirled about the American Red Cross’ fundraising and spending after Superstorm Sandy. When the Red Cross contested a ProPublica reporter’s routine request to a government agency for disclosures about that spending, claiming it was a “trade secret,” we didn’t walk away frustrated — we dug in. And we asked readers to help us find out more, partnering with NPR News on a series of increasingly in-depth reporting.

The [resulting stories](#) revealed the Red Cross as more intent on “brand building” and public relations than delivering services — an organization that massed emergency response vehicles as the backdrop for a news conference by the CEO, that sent other vehicles out empty to give the appearance of service delivery when there was none, that kept forces concentrated at the site of the Republican National Convention rather than shift them as an approaching hurricane veered away. The Red Cross huffed and puffed, issued press releases and public statements. But they did not cite a single inaccuracy in our reporting. After we challenged Red Cross officials about their repeated assertions that 91 cents of every dollar donated was spent on programs, they admitted the figure was overstated, made changes on their own website, but refused to release their revised number.

91%*

When a former examiner at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York sued for wrongful termination, some saw the case primarily as raising questions about the issues about which she and her superiors had been struggling — the adequacy of the conflicts of interest policies at Goldman Sachs. But ProPublica, in partnership with public radio’s This American Life, discovered Carmen Segarra had recorded 46 hours of confidential conversations inside the New York Fed, a treasure trove of information on a famously secret organization.

The recordings shed a bright light on the Fed’s culture, a culture that seems to stifle dissent and has made regulators excessively cozy with the financial giants they are supposedly overseeing. The [reporting](#) was greatly



Carmen Segarra

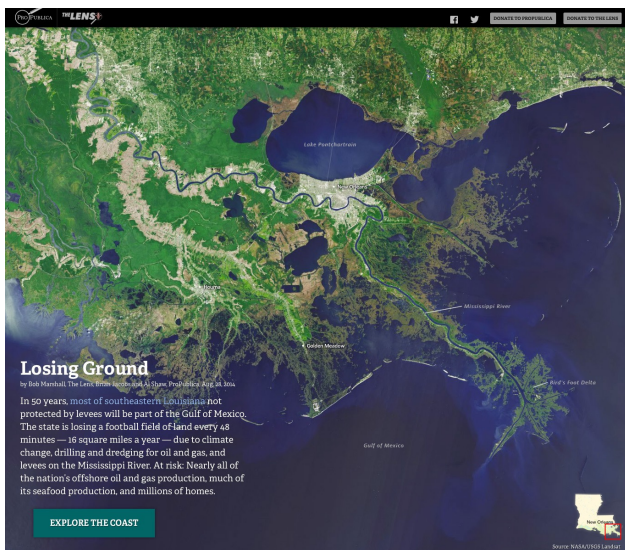
strengthened by the juxtaposition of Segarra’s experiences with a confidential report the New York Fed itself had commissioned that had identified similar issues. The result was a U.S. Senate hearing and calls for possible legislative reform.

Some problem subjects are avoided because they seem too large, or have become so

intractable as to be beyond what journalism can tackle. Months before questions about policing turned the nation’s attention back to race relations, ProPublica published the first of two major articles about how the country’s modern quest for racial equality had taken a fundamentally wrong turn on the issue that had ignited that quest — the segregation of our schools. Reporting 60 years after the Supreme Court had declared that segregation is inherently unequal and thus unconstitutional, our reporting traced how the tide of desegregation has long since crested, and a move toward re-segregation has taken hold in much of the country.

The [first installment in our work on “Segregation Now”](#) was published in partnership with the Atlantic and focused on

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the city where Gov. George Wallace once defiantly stood in the schoolhouse door. But as the year unfolded, it became clear that the [second major piece](#) in the series should tie more closely to today’s national debate, and looked at the issue of segregated schools in and around Ferguson, Missouri. In all, this powerful work reminded us of what seemed so clear in 1954 — that education remains critical to any serious attempt to realize the dreams of social and economic mobility and racial equality in America.



Other stories may have previously gone untold, or at least not widely understood, because the best means had not yet been found for telling them. ProPublica’s work on the rapid erosion of the Louisiana coast, [“Losing Ground,”](#) reported and published in partnership with the New Orleans nonprofit The Lens, was our most ambitious data project to date. It brought home to hundreds of thousands of viewers what it means for land to be vanishing at the rate of a football field every hour. The project drew on remote sensing, a National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration list of named places in the U.S. that have disappeared, deep reporting from the region and arresting original photos and video. For the follow-up piece on efforts to salvage part of the coastline, "[Louisiana's Moonshot](#)," we employed not only satellite photography, but also photos we and partners at PublicLab in New Orleans took from cameras attached to kites and balloons.

There are also tales most news organizations ignore because the truth seems to have been buried in the past, even if the lessons for the present could be compelling. The tangled relationship between rubber giant Firestone and Liberian warlord and war criminal Charles Taylor is such a story. Working for more than a year in partnership with Frontline, ProPublica investigated the crucial role Firestone played in the rise of Taylor during Liberia's horrific civil



war. [Our work](#) gave witness to a critical episode in the modern history of Africa, as well as posing deep and nuanced moral questions that confront multinational companies seeking to operate in conflict zones and other hostile environments today.

ProPublica told all of these stories in 2014 — and many more, from change-making reporting on how the federal government has mismanaged [efforts to identify our long-lost missing in action](#), to work on predatory loans to active duty personnel and on [abuses leading to the garnishment of working families' wages](#); from an evocative series on the [50th anniversary of "Freedom Summer"](#) to an eye-opening investigation of the financial peril to states and local governments from [tobacco bonds](#); from the epidemic of [physical restraints being used on children in our schools](#) to the nation's most sustained effort to bring transparency to [medical prescribing practices](#); from shedding new light on [the influence of dark money on our elections](#) to exploring new legal frontiers in [sex and gender issues](#); from fresh reporting about [the plague of guns in America](#) to a look at [profiteering from charter schools](#); from important reporting on [privacy and surveillance](#) by both government and industry, to [a seminal report on the racial disparities in the use of force by police](#).

There is much more to come in 2015, and we can't wait.

Impact

The most important test of ProPublica is whether our work is having impact. By this, we mean not audience size or prizes, but real world change. Examples of what we mean, and discussions of how we think about the subject of impact, can be found at <http://www.propublica.org/about/impact/>

- In March, just weeks after we began publishing stories in partnership with NPR on the dysfunction of the Pentagon’s efforts to find and identify the bodies of missing soldiers from past wars, the Secretary of Defense announced an overhaul of the program. With an internal report calling for a “paradigm shift,” the department pledged to make more modern use of DNA, and to combine two feuding agencies into one. In June, the military decided to disinter the likely remains of Army Pvt. Bud Kelder and 10 other men, who died while being held as POWs in 1942. In July, a Pentagon inspector general’s draft report we obtained repeated many of the criticisms identified in the ProPublica/NPR stories. In August, the official who had led the program was told he would lose his job.
- New rules finalized in May give the Department of Health and Human Services authority to expel physicians from Medicare if they engage in abusive prescribing. The new rules also allow the agency overseeing Medicare to compel health providers to enroll in the program before ordering drugs for patients covered by Medicare Part D. Both rule changes follow reporting done last year by ProPublica documenting repeated failures of Medicare oversight.
- In December, six and a half years after revelations in a ProPublica story led to the last-minute halting of a proposal to freely allow fracking of natural gas in New York state, the state finally concluded its review of such drilling and Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a ban on fracking in New York.
- A new law, passed by the California legislature in late August, in part in response to a ProPublica investigation, would hold companies legally responsible if temp agencies or subcontractors cheat temporary workers out of pay or endanger their safety. In December, Illinois regulators



moved to revoke the business license of a check cashing store identified in our reporting.

- Sparked in part by ProPublica reporting published in June in partnership with NPR, Massachusetts in December issued new rules placing limits on physical restraints or isolation of students.
- Immediately after publication of an article on July 21 noting that many users of online sites were being tracked by an extremely persistent technique known as “canvas fingerprinting” produced by a firm called AddThis, use of the technology was discontinued by the national

security blog Lawfare, the German digital marketer Legatus and by YouPorn. In August, the Tor browser began default blocking of the technology.



- Another new law in California, enacted in the aftermath of our series last year on lax oversight of assisted living facilities, permits the state to halt admissions to facilities that fail to correct serious violations or pay fines.

• Rules governing loans to service members under the Military Lending Act are being tightened in response to reporting last year by ProPublica and public radio’s Marketplace. The new rules close loopholes in the law, tighten regulatory caps on interest rates for what amount to payday loans and no longer permit service members from having loan payments for personal property deducted from their pay.

- After our reporting earlier this year about the circumstances behind illegal doping by sprinter Tyson Gay and the role of coach Jon Drummond, an arbitration panel in December banned Drummond from track and field for eight years.
- Further reporting this year, published in partnership with the Washington Post and focused on a company called USA Discounters, which lends widely to service members and then frequently sues them, seems to have prompted that firm to change its name to USA Living after six U.S. senators challenged its practices. Two other companies mentioned in the same story settled an enforcement proceeding in December with the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), paying penalties and agreeing to refunds and on limits to their ability to sue their customers.

- The CFPB is also targeting World Finance, whose installment loans were a focus of ProPublica reporting in 2013, in an investigation of whether the company's loans and their marketing violate federal law. World Finance disclosed the investigation in March.
- Possible underpayment of natural gas royalties to landowners by Chesapeake Energy, spotlighted in a 2013 ProPublica report, is now the subject of an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, Chesapeake disclosed in November.
- The FDA in February launched a formal review of its own practices with respect to the regulation of over-the-counter drugs. The agency announcement followed reporting last fall by ProPublica on the dangers of acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol, which would be among the drugs affected by any new rules or procedures.
- In response to ProPublica reporting in January and February on the National Quality Forum, a key health care industry group, the Quality Forum strengthened its protections against conflicts of interest in recommending patient safety measures and its CEO resigned from two health care company boards.
- Teva Pharmaceuticals agreed in March to pay more than \$27 million to settle state and federal allegations related to its dealings with Chicago psychiatrist Michael Reinstein, whose prescribing patterns were the subject of ProPublica reporting in 2009 and again last year. In August, the state of Illinois indefinitely suspended Dr. Reinstein's medical license.
- In November, the North Carolina State Board of Education placed a for-profit charter school chain about whose practices we had reported on financial probationary status, forcing them to disclose to regulators the salaries of school administrators.



Recognition For Our Work

ProPublica was the first online news organization to win a Pulitzer Prize (2010) and the first to win a Pulitzer for stories not published in print (2011). Our work was honored in 2014 as follows:

- ProPublica was deeply honored in February to receive a MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.
- Reporting on **faults in the Medicare Part D** program by reporters Charles Ornstein, Tracy Weber and Jennifer LaFleur and our **Prescriber Checkup** news application by developers Jeff Larson and Lena Groeger garnered the Philip Meyer Award for journalism using social science research, a Society for News Design Award of Excellence, the Health Data Liberators Award from the Health Data Consortium and the Deadline Club Award for digital innovation.
- Our coverage of **the risks of Tylenol** by reporters T. Christian Miller and Jeff Gerth and developers Al Shaw, Lena Groeger and Krista Kjellman Schmidt received the Al Neuharth Award for Innovation in Investigative Journalism from the Online News Association, a Best in Business Award from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers, a first place and a third place Award for Excellence in Health Care Coverage from the Association of Health Care Journalists, and a Society for News Design Award of Excellence.
- Michael Grabell's reporting on the **plight of temporary workers** received the Bartlett & Steele Gold Award for Investigative Business Journalism, the American Society of News Editors Award for Distinguished Writing on Diversity and the Deadline Club Award for minority focus.
- A range of **news applications** from our team also received a raft of other honors. These included five Online Journalism Awards, including ProPublica's third citation in five years for general excellence and two awards for our **Segregation Now** series, the Data Journalism Jurors' Choice Award and a Society for News Design Award of Excellence for ProPublica's organizational portfolio. We also received a Society of Professional Journalists Sigma Delta Chi Award for informational graphics; a Deadline Club Award for local news reporting; two Society for News Design Awards of Excellence, a Data Journalism Award and the Asian American Journalists Association Multimedia Award for our **China's Memory Hole** news app; a Society for News Design Award of Excellence for our app on **where Congress stands on guns**; and Society

for News Design Awards of Excellence for the individual portfolios of developers Lena Groeger and Al Shaw.

- Our project on “**Life and Death in Assisted Living**” in partnership with Frontline and reported for ProPublica by A.C. Thompson won a Best in Business Award from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers and the Deadline Club Award for business feature.
- **Jesse Eisinger’s column, The Trade**, published in partnership with the New York Times, won a Best in Business Award from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers.
- Our 2014 coverage of problems with the military’s program for **identifying the missing in action** won a Front Page Award for online in-depth reporting.
- ProPublica’s **health care coverage** won the Citizen Advocacy Center Shimberg Public Service Award and an Online Journalism Award for topical reporting.
- Reporter Paul Kiel’s work on **abusive installment loans** was a finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists for national reporting, the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism for personal finance and two Best in Business Awards from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers.
- ProPublica founder and executive chairman **Paul Steiger** received the William Allen White Foundation National Citation from the University of Kansas’s White School of Journalism and Mass Communications. In October, he also received the 2014 John Peter and Anna Catherine Zenger Award from the University of Arizona School of Journalism.
- Senior reporter **Julia Angwin** was named reporter of the year by the Newswomen’s Club of New York.

What People are Saying

“Some of the most memorable stories we’ve ever done on This American Life have been collaborations with ProPublica. I’m glad they’re out there. And not just as collaborators. In this moment when reporting budgets are still being slashed in newsrooms everywhere, I love that ProPublica has figured out how to keep in-depth reporting going, and going with such aggressiveness and variety. I love that there’s a special clubhouse for brainiac reporters to wield their full investigative powers. Is it ridiculous that I picture it like the headquarters that teams of superheroes always have in the movies? That mansion in X-Men films or the flying aircraft carrier in the Avengers? Except in ProPublica’s case, the superpower each person brings to bear is his or her intense expertise in some subject that you only get after years or decades of working the beat. They uncover things no one does. They’re a watchdog. They deserve support.”

—**Ira Glass**

Host of This American Life

December 29

“Increasingly news is delivered as a form of entertainment. ProPublica’s articles are insightful and detailed enough to cause me to think and consider my perspective on the news item. The news articles stimulate thinking, whether you agree or not. I rely on ProPublica for insight not just headlines. I want to know what’s behind the story. ProPublica provides this.”

—**Richard Ordowich**

Reader and donor

December 2

What People are Saying

“There are also several web-based news organizations that sometimes break important national stories. The very best of them is ProPublica, a non-profit organization founded by Paul Steiger, the former managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, that is devoted to investigative reporting, an expensive specialty that has suffered in the era of disappearing newspaper profits. ProPublica provides pro bono journalism of the highest quality, as good as the investigative projects of the major newspapers.”

—**Robert G. Kaiser**

Former managing editor, the *Washington Post*

“The Bad News About the News,” Brookings Institution

October 16

“I am a newshound. I despise partisan media organizations. I have to waste so much time to find the real story. In ProPublica’s relatively short existence, it has risen to the top of the credibility chart. Fearless. Non-partisan. Let’s go get these bad guys wherever the trail leads. I just love it. Sometimes the story results don’t go well with my politics-and with ProPublica as a source, I re-examine my position. It is rare that I do that with any other source. Thank god... for ProPublica.”

—**Peter Snowden**

Reader and donor

December 4

What People are Saying

“The non-profit investigative newsroom ProPublica calls what it does ‘accountability journalism.’ It is the only kind of journalism ProPublica is interested in doing. Here’s how they describe it:

‘Our work focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with “moral force.” We do this by producing journalism that shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong and on the failures of those with power to vindicate the trust placed in them.’

That is a view of the world as strong as polarization is deep. Political journalists need to adopt a similar view or they will slide into irrelevance. There is one other option: savvy analysts of the game. Winners and losers, who’s up, who’s down, strategy and tactics. That really isn’t journalism, though, it’s scorekeeping.”

—**Jay Rosen**

NYU professor
The Conversation
October 24

ProPublica’s Growing Publishing Platform

Partners in 2014: 39

Page views at ProPublica.org:

1,668,000 average per month, up 25% over 2013

Unique visitors to ProPublica.org:

672,000 average per month, up 20% over 2013

Daily email subscribers: almost 73,000, up 14% over 2013

Twitter followers: more than 335,000, up 33% over 2013

Facebook fans: more than 94,000, up 50% over 2013

Publishing Partners, 2014

ProPublica has had 115 publishing partners in six and half years. We choose each partner with an eye toward maximizing the impact of the story in question. Here is a list of our partners in 2014:

Amazon.com	McClatchy DC
Albany Times-Union	Miami Herald*
Atlantic	Newark Star-Ledger
Boston Globe	New Republic*
BuzzFeed	New York Daily News
Center for Investigative Reporting*	New York Times
Chicago Tribune	NPR News
Daily Beast	Philadelphia Inquirer
Dallas Morning News	Raleigh News & Observer*
Denver Post	Slate
Essence*	Source
Frontline	Sports Illustrated*
Grist*	Tampa Bay Times
Guardian	This American Life
Lens*	Univision
Los Angeles Times	Upworthy*
Marie Claire*	USA Today
Marketplace	Vice*
Mashable	Washington Post
	WNYC

**new partner in 2014*

Financial Information, 2014

(rounded to nearest \$1,000)

Revenues

Board of Directors contributions and related grants	\$4,652,000
Major grants and gifts (\$50,000 and above)	6,752,000
Online donations	241,000
Business Advisory Council contributions	160,000
Other grants and gifts	956,000
Earned income and interest	205,000
Total	\$12,966,000

Expenses

News salaries, payments and benefits	\$7,471,000
Non-news salaries and benefits	1,372,000
Personnel support	881,000
Outreach	472,000
Professional fees	60,000
Occupancy and office	1,128,000
Capital costs	119,000
Taxes	4,000
Total	\$11,507,000

Total donors: more than 2,600

Notes

All figures preliminary and unaudited.

Major gifts includes \$1 million from John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as Award for Creative and Effective Institutions, and earmarked to augment ProPublica's reserves.

Business Advisory Council contributions include only those not categorized elsewhere.

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ProPublica has a journalism advisory board to advise ProPublica's editors from time to time on the full range of issues related to ProPublica's journalism, from ethical issues to the direction of its reporting efforts:

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David Boardman, dean, Temple University School of Media & Communications

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ProPublica also has a Business Advisory Council, a group of executives who advise on emerging business and technology issues:

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Front Cover: Damage from Hurricane Sandy in the Rockaway neighborhood of Queens, N.Y. on October 31, 2012, *Spencer Platt/Getty Images*; **Page 3:** Mississippi State Senator David Jordan photographed in Greenwood City Hall, *Edmund D. Fountain for ProPublica*; **Page 4:** 91% graphic, *David Sleight/ProPublica*; Carmen Segarra outside the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, on Oct. 10, 2013, *Nabil Rahman for ProPublica*; **Page 5:** “Segregation Now”; “Losing Ground” **Page 6:** Firestone sign in Liberia, *Ashley Gilberston for ProPublica*; **Page 7:** Prescription drug graphic, *David Sleight/ProPublica*; **Page 8:** Privacy graphic, *David Sleight/ProPublica*; **Page 9:** First graders at the Columbus Charter School in Whiteville, N.C., *Travis Dove for ProPublica*.