Chapter 4: Community engagement and impact

‘Time to change journalism’

In the digital age, we don’t just consume the media; we are the media. Friends, neighbors, co-workers, family — seemingly everyone is tweeting, posting, liking, commenting, creating and using news.

But news by itself is not enough. Knight Foundation believes communities are at their best when informed and engaged. For news to matter, people must act on it. Solutions require people to engage with each other as well as the issues at hand. Impact requires community.

To help replace local news lost in the digital upheaval, the Knight Community Information Challenge put up $24 million to encourage local foundations to do more journalism and media projects. One such effort is the New Jersey News Commons with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. It combines public broadcasting, nonprofit and student journalism with community engagement projects. We expect it to provide information and a platform for debate, improving the way the community rebuilds after Hurricane Sandy. We’ve also supported recovers.org for communities that want to plan before disaster strikes.

News is essential. It isn’t the only ingredient for community change, yet it remains a key element, particularly the verified, clarified forms of news we call journalism. In recent years, Knight has granted more than $20 million to investigative journalism programs through its Investigative Reporting Initiative. Grants to such nonprofits as ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Reporting have paid for themselves hundreds of times over in social benefit. Not all community news is investigative. Knight worked with the

National Endowment of the Arts to create a pilot arts journalism competition that inspired the NEA to build arts journalism into its traditional grant making. Such studies as the Soul of the Community show that arts and social offerings are part of the glue that binds people to their communities in ways that increase prosperity.

Investigative news, arts journalism … how does a news organization decide what a community wants and needs? Public radio station WBEZ in Chicago does it by asking the community. Enter Curious City, where people can vote on the issues they think should be reported. Or consider the Virtual Assignment Desk, an experiment run by New York University. There, people sometimes cover events they have nominated when the staff of The Local is occupied elsewhere. Or take a look at PolicyMic, a platform on which the big issues can be debated. News leaders know that high-impact journalism often taps into pre-existing networks of people organized around the topic in question. So engagement can increase impact. To engage communities, news providers of all types, from investigative journalists to the neighbor down the block, need to be open about how and why they do what they do. Yet transparency is not as easy as it sounds. Even the best reporters find it difficult. “Mainstream journalism has a bias for bad news,” says the website of theSolutions Journalism Network, co-founded by Dan Bornstein, co-writer of the “Fixes” column in The New York Times “Opinionator” section. “Newsworthy solutions exist everywhere. It’s time to change journalism. It’s time to change the world.”

When we let communities grab hold of some of the tools of journalism, we may find quite a few folks putting the searchlight down and reaching instead for their digital sunglasses, to filter out the news they can’t do anything about and to seek the shades of meaning needed to solve problems.

If investigative journalists don't explain why their work matters, who will?

Police investigated the scene of Oakland Post editor Chauncey Bailey.
(David Paul Morris/San Francisco Chronicle via Associated Press)

This really happened at the annual conference of the Investigative Reporters and Editors. I am in a hotel ballroom with some of the world's best journalists, even on a good day a tough crowd.

I start by asking a few questions from the podium.

“How many of you believe investigative reporting is worth much more to society than it costs?” Almost all the hands go up.

“How many believe that the average American — the cashier at the grocery store — understands the true value of investigative reporting?” Only one hand goes up.

“How many of you believe it is your responsibility to explain the value of investigative reporting to society?” Only a third says yes.

There you have it. Investigative reporting is valuable. People don’t understand its value. Yet the journalists (at least most of them) don’t think their job is to explain things.

For at least a century during the age of mass media, journalists convinced themselves that they didn’t need to bother. No one else was doing journalism. They could do it the way they wanted.

But in this networked, two-way world, people are now committing millions of acts of journalism every day through blogs and social media platforms. Journalists could invite them into the professional journalism process. Or they might convince themselves they don’t need journalists anymore.

It comes down to one question: If investigative journalists don’t explain the impact of their work, who will?

We say this as allies. After the media money meltdown of 2008-09, when everyone said journalism was doomed, Knight Foundation announced an investigative reporting initiative totaling $15 million. Including endowments, the figure is closer to $20 million. You can't spend that much without learning a few things.

We learned news organizations can go from birth to a Pulitzer with lightning speed; that newly invented open-source document-handling software could be used by hundreds of newsrooms; that nonprofits and for-profits can collaborate and that journalism education has an amazing role in investigative reporting. (Just one example of all this: a major student investigation on the national transportation system that ran on the front page of The Washington Post.)

Today, there are scores of recently born nonprofit news sites. By 2013, more than 80 were members of the Investigative News Network. Many foundations that didn't care about news and information now fund it.

Though there are fewer journalists in traditional media organizations on the commercial side, we are seeing how new techniques and technologies can multiply investigative powers.

Journalism doesn't look dead to me.

We've also learned something about business. Just because an investigative unit is a nonprofit doesn't mean it escapes reality. A story by itself does not save the world. It must be seen, understood, acted on and yes, paid for.

We learned the new nonprofit organizations need: content that matters; connectivity, to reach people; a community they've engaged, giving them access to cash. I call them the Four Cs — content, connectivity, community and capital.

Tracking the impact of investigative reporting

All impact can't be reduced to numbers. What you can track, however, shows results that are too miraculous to keep from the public:

Three examples:

ProPublica and NPR revealed that veterans were being wrongly treated for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at a cost of more than 30 times what's needed. Multiply that by the tens of thousands of veterans, and one can say that by fostering change in the military's diagnosis and treatment regimens, this reporting is saving society — conservatively — $200 million.

The Center for Public Integrity and The Washington Post exposed lax U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development loan policies. Six big lenders were kicked out of the program. That's a saving of at least $100 million to taxpayers.

The Center for Investigative Reporting and its dozens of commercial partners exposed earthquake hazards in California schools, and officials finally allowed schools to easily tap a $200 million quake safety fund.

I've used these examples before. Just three stories add up to half a billion dollars in social impact, plus the priceless impact of lives improved or saved. This suggests a new approach for lawmakers who are interested in deficit reduction. Increase by a hundredfold the number of investigative journalists in America and let nature take its course. If journalists don't tell the story of their impact, who will? For every reporter who buys this argument there are at least two who don't. They fear getting stuck doing

only stories with large measurable savings to society. They also can give real-world examples:

Numbers or no numbers, journalists need to expose the cops who run wild or nurses who kill people or colleges that brush aside rape.

Journalists must be able to do stories even when they cost society money. Like the money spent to replace railroad ties in New England because the first batch was made with the wrong concrete. Or the money spent to shut down the death penalty system in Illinois because they executed the wrong people.

Journalists need to do some stories even if nothing happens right away. Like exposing the companies getting rich from war with no-bid contracts. The military industrial complex can be hard to change.

True, not all investigations have measurable dollar impacts. Should that excuse journalists from trying to count the ones that do? If relentless monitoring of the gas drilling industry saves millions (or billions) because we avoid water pollution cleanup, journalists need to add up those numbers. If exposing credit card company abuses saves consumers many millions or even billions, journalists need to tally that as well. And when the numbers aren't there, but the impact still is, why can't that story still be told?

ProPublica founder Paul Steiger explained the situation this way: "Where there are clear dollar savings, we should take credit for them. When the success is qualitative, we should rejoice in that."

Either way, telling this story is up to the journalists. With the many thousands of traditional journalism jobs that have vanished in recent years, too many of them investigative, journalists can no longer say "It's not our job." This is a fact-based profession. Fact-based arguments about our value are better than faith-based arguments.

The facts may not be kind to journalism. Even prize-winning journalism can produce no impact. Yet the reasons why a story did not make a difference can be important to know. Was the investigation's revelation actually old news to the community? Did it pale in comparison to other issues? Was the news organization trusted? Was it engaged with the community? Did it try to get a debate going? Did it follow up on the stories? In the end, did people think their actions mattered, that change was possible?

Even if impact is complicated, there are ways to explain it. I'm not saying you should beat your chest and scream "Look what I did!" I'm saying you should report how a piece of news was revealed and spread and what the community did about that. Shine your light. Then come back later and provide some shades of meaning. Investigative reporters are good at that on other stories, and telling this story — the story of the role of journalism — greases the machinery that produces the other stories. If journalists can more clearly communicate their dollar value and their even bigger social value, the wheels will turn. Raising money should be easier; cutting budgets should be harder. On the whole, the future of investigative reporting will be brighter. Journalists may not like to crow, but these days, they better at least tweet.

At ProPublica they do much more, following story results regularly and issuing reports on how to track investigative impact. This sort of thorough accounting suggests that as journalists become good at following up, at explaining why their stories mattered, academia may get better at it as well. Certainly improvement would give the News Literacy Project a lot of good material.

You don't have to be the size of ProPublica to do this. I'll do it myself by going behind the scenes of a story you may have heard me mention before. In 2007, on a street

corner, Oakland Post editor Chauncey Bailey was killed by a man with a shotgun. The reason: To stop him from investigating strange dealings at a local bakery.

Knight Foundation gave the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education a $125,000 grant to create the Chauncey Bailey Project, an investigation that included nonprofit journalism, commercial journalists and student journalists from all media. Call it an experiment in collaboration. It was a bumpy ride, but it turned out to be a prototype for what the Center for Investigative Reporting did later throughout California and the nation. That's because Dori Maynard at Maynard Institute, Robert Rosenthal at Center for Investigative Reporting, Sandy Close at New American Media and Martin Reynolds at the Oakland Tribune — and many others — made it work.

The journalism revealed Chauncey's murder was part of a pattern of murders, kidnappings and other crimes. It identified the trigger man, an accomplice and the mastermind. In addition, after the journalists revealed that police had delayed a raid that could have prevented the murder and then tried to cover it up, the police chief resigned.

The man who ordered the murder of Chauncey Bailey was guilty. So was his accomplice. They're looking at life without parole. The trigger man, who flipped on them, got 25 years.

Did the Chauncey Bailey project have impact? District Attorney Nancy E. O'Malley saidthis: "The investigation and prosecution of these violent crimes has been a top priority of my office … With today's verdicts, justice was served, and we hope that the outcome will provide some closure to the families of the victims … These verdicts also stand for our abiding conviction that violence against the free voice of the press will not

be tolerated in our society."

The prosecutor continued: "I would especially like to recognize and acknowledge the Chauncey Bailey Project which worked diligently and tirelessly to ensure that the defendants responsible for these senseless murders were brought to justice."

Here is the bottom line: a $125,000 grant; a new model in investigative collaboration, three convictions; police chief resignation; and press freedom and justice upheld. Money well spent; a story of impact, not just told to a room full of investigative reporters but also blogged, tweeted, put out there in speeches and in letters. We should keep telling these stories until we have found a way to show everyone how good journalism matters, including that clerk at the grocery store.

This is an edited version of a luncheon talk delivered at the annual convention of the Investigative Reporters and Editors.

The story is not all that matters

Investigative reporting deserves a great deal of attention, not only because it represents journalism at its purest and most potent, but also because it is perennially at risk. In the digital age, the economics supporting this public service work have been totally unhinged. To try to help, Knight Foundation invested many millions in nonprofit investigative reporting. It is easy to see why. Jack and Jim Knight were newspapermen. We're the only foundation of our size with a platoon of people who grew up in the news business. We know investigative reporting punches above its weight. Even though some stories don't pan out, all in all, it creates impact far beyond the initial investment.

Our foundation belongs to the choir, however, and the choir is a closed system. During this past century, America's tight network of journalists taught itself real professional reverence for the Fourth Estate: Taught itself but often ignored everyone else. Not long ago the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism released a survey about local news. A headline in the survey deserves attention: Sixty-nine percent of America believes that if local newspapers no longer existed, it would be no big deal.

If newspaper news is gone, people think, they'll just get the news from radio, TV and the Internet. Journalists know that's not so. Daily papers still produce most of the country's local news. People do not know this fact. How did the nation become so badly informed about the mechanics of how they are informed?

Journalists are at least partly to blame. We chose not to tell people how news systems worked. We did not want anyone in the kitchen as we alone worked out our recipes for news. The results? Journalists have helped create a nation of functional news illiterates. Sure, the educational system helped a lot, too. But journalists played a big role. Since we did not really understand our communities, we weren't bothered in the least that our communities did not understand us.

In Orlando, I polled 800 investigative reporters and editors and confirmed a few things. They believe their journalism produces impact. They believe no one understands that. Finally, they believe (at least two thirds of them) that this is not their problem.

I disagree. This is the digital age, the age of the rising value of transparency. From now on, part of a journalist's job should be to help his or her community understand how news works. Yet most journalists seem to be otherwise occupied. We are still fighting

over the cookbook while the kitchen is on fire. Before journalism can open up, its industrial-age workplace culture must change. American newsrooms are among the most defensive workplaces measured. Performing with the perfectionism of a nuclear power plant crew or the strict routine of a military combat unit might sometimes help journalists cover the news. But such cultures can be toxic to innovations.

At the heart of all this is the great, glorious story. The entire 20th Century journalistic gestalt put the story at center stage. Many journalism schools pushed it hard, but they were wrong. The story is not the only thing that matters. An extraordinary story by itself may not change the world. An amazing story may not even be seen. A wonderful story might cause no change at all. Someone must absorb it, share it, act on it and pay for it.

I learned this the hard way. One investigation I put on the front page would produce immediate change, say an emergency water rationing law within 24 hours. But another — almost scientific in similarity, by the same people, same quality, same display, same day of the week, only the topic different — would trigger no reaction at all, not even a call or letter. Clearly, something mattered that had nothing to do with our journalism; that something was the community.

Communities would have a word with journalists not just about story selection but also about fundamental storytelling skills, if we asked. Accuracy is an issue: Every single day journalists still wrongly portray giant swaths of the American community, feeding stereotypes and sewing fear. Context is an issue: Journalists still too often take the cheap, easy, sensationalistic way out, failing to report the news in a context that adds meaning. Fairness is an issue: The idea that journalism must be carried on behind closed doors is inherently unfair to the communities we serve. That inward focus keeps

journalists from engaging their whole communities and stifles accountability and transparency.

Journalists do these things, mostly without even thinking about them, in violation of their most sacred covenant. “Every journalist believes that he or she works, ultimately, for the reader, not for the editor, or for the publisher, or for the corporation, or for those opaque financial institutions that hold the stock,” said John Carroll, who edited three major newspapers with distinction. “We all know journalists who have lost their jobs on principle. They have refused to kill important stories or to write glowingly about politicians or advertisers who don’t deserve it. They have done this because their first loyalty is to the reader.”

Journalistic loyalty to citizen and community begs the question of transparency. Being fair doesn’t just mean reporting the many sides of a story; it also means showing people your side. Let them behind the curtain. Who are you? Why are you doing this story? What objective tools are you using? What’s your news ethic? Showing your work is a best practice in digital journalism, the finished story being only one form of interaction with the public. Networked journalists talk with their communities about what they are working on, solicit tips, post unedited interviews and much more.

For news organizations transparency also means explaining where the money comes from. Knight Foundation, in fact, has adopted a new policy: to receive grants from us, news providers need to reveal their project’s major donors. The best of them don’t need to be told: They already do. The others have misplaced fears. They don’t want to show how the sausage is made because they’re afraid it opens them up to criticism of bias. But keeping the secret is what’s making them look bad.

Can investigative reporters further open up the way they work?

Let's take the book by Thomas Peele, Killing the Messenger, about the story leading up to Oakland journalist Chauncey Bailey's murder. As you know, the Chauncey Bailey Projectled the journalism that found the killers. The district attorney credited the project with aglowing testimonial. As you probably do not know, Peele's voluminous tome left out the quote. The book tells people everything about the murder except one thing: that the journalism mattered.

Who speaks for journalism? Book reviewers don't focus on it. Readers don't know about it. The Chauncey Bailey Project has won more than a dozen awards given by journalists to journalists. It has been explained at the conferences given by journalists for journalists. It will be taught to the students of journalism, up-and-coming members of the choir.

Highlighting impact

If they can muster just a fraction of the passion they use to chase the news, journalists can better explain their profession through open contests and open conventions.

Journalism contests have proliferated. Just the major ones number roughly 200. If you count regional awards, there are thousands. If the prize is big enough, news organizations tell their audiences they won. That's not the same as reaching out to the legions of people who don't know where their local news really comes from. If our contests cared about communities, not just journalists, they would help people know how the journalism happened and why that mattered.

Suppose a great investigation gets a state to release earthquake safety funds for schools. If an open contest picks the story as a winner, the contest organizers would then alert PTAs, teacher organizations, administrator's organizations, even state officials in the place where the journalism made a difference. The contest sends letters, posts on Facebook, blogs, emails, does videos and holds community meetings explaining the winning story. Why do this? Because, the contest would explain, the role of journalism is not understood. I'm still waiting for that sort of contest to happen.

Journalism conferences also have multiplied. Why should any conference of journalists take place without at least one session involving leaders and citizens of the host community? If investigative reporter and professor Lowell Bergman can get CIA and FBI officials to come to his Logan investigative reporting symposia, certainly a more mundane journalism convention could attract a mayor, city council or other community leaders. In those sessions, attendees take apart the news flows, talk frankly about them, hear complaints and offer suggestions.

Open contests and open conventions would create thousands of new community encounters every year. Yet they don't exist.

Professional organizations and publications can help explain the role of journalism by focusing more on its impact. They can show how to track it, explain how to be accurate and not self-serving when reporting it. Where there is no impact, they can unpack those projects and see where they failed to engage people.

Journalism schools could explain the role of journalism by teaching 21st century literacies — digital, media, news and civic fluency — to every student in their universities. Understanding the role of journalism should be part of those literacies. Yet

those who teach news literacy too often fail to use the techniques of the digital world. By failing to hop on that bus, they'll likely be left behind. Such books as Detecting Bull are just not enough. Eventually, digital media literacy will be digitized itself and integrated into K-12 schools, and become a general education requirement for college graduation.

There are some 100,000 general news journalists in America. There are perhaps 220,000 journalism and communication students and professors, and some 500,000 people loosely categorized as doing nonfiction editorial work. If we open up, change our orientation to reach outward, we could engage millions. If each had 400 Facebook friends, journalists could engage the entire nation. The problem is that journalists whose list of friends doesn't include many other journalists are hard to find.

To have a conversation about why journalism matters, we also would have to listen to those who find news, as it is presented today, too boring, too negative, too slanted or simply out of touch. If we truly listen and engage, we will begin to see why some of our work causes instant change and other stories do absolutely nothing. By thinking beyond the story, in the end we can help the story.

There is an as-yet-undiscovered science of impact. Do stories create more impact when people think that their communities can actually fix the problems? When they have the groups, tools or systems to fix it? What makes them consider this particular problem a priority? These are complex questions. They dovetail with network theory and ideas about social capital. Two foundations, Gates and Knight, are hoping insights on digital media impact will come from a major project we've funded at the University of Southern California.

The primary colors of journalism

Producing good journalism is difficult. It deserves more respect. If journalists are more open and in better conversation with the communities they serve, that will help. But that's also hard to do, especially for the older generations, because it requires breaking habits and taking on a new view of a world that is changing almost beyond imagining.

Crayola crayons started with eight colors. There are now 133 crayons. But in cyberspace the colors number in the billions.

At the start of the 20th century, Crayola hoped to help young artists see the world with eight basic crayons. The first colors were red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, brown and black.

Around this same time, English writer Rudyard Kipling summed up the basic way journalists explained the world with these lines in "The Elephant's Child":

"I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who."

How has the world changed in the past 100 years? We have blasted off to worlds beyond Crayola's eight basic crayons. Search the Web for modern computer color, 36-bit color,

and you'll see it supports not thousands nor even millions but, they say, 68.71 billion colors.

So what about journalism? How many billions of bits of new meaning do our digital tools support? Certainly visual journalists can benefit from a world of infinite color, but what of the rest of them?

Kipling realized his serving-men had limits. The poem concludes:

"I let them rest from nine till five,
For I am busy then,
As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea,
For they are hungry men.
But different folk have different views;
I know a person small—
She keeps ten million serving-men,
Who get no rest at all!

She sends 'em abroad on her own affairs,
From the second she opens her eyes—
One million Hows, two million Wheres,
And seven million Whys!"

Today's children, the digital natives, are growing up in a world where new tools can express reality in all its billions of colors. We digital immigrants need to drop our old ideas of what journalists can do and use the power of the digital age to program billions

of “serving men” in search for true things. Or never mind programming; we could just ask the billions of serving people who now make up the population of this planet.

The alternative, sticking with the old frameworks, leads only to despair. The membership in Investigative Reporters and Editors, for example, is still down 20 percent from its peak of 5,000. The American Society of News Editors census is grimmer. Its latest total is 38,000 daily newspaper journalists, down from the peak of 56,900 in 1990. Daily paper newsrooms are operating at staffing levels not seen since the 1970s. Put simply, there are 19,000 fewer cooks in the kitchen.

Yet the collapse of the newspaper’s economic model is not the collapse of news. Print newspaper advertising is in free fall. But Web traffic is up. We have new “power tools” — super sunglasses that allow us to filter data without the journalistic armies of old. New organizations such as the Investigative News Network and new digital news outlets are rising. The Online News Association is booming. Student journalism is rising. NPR looks good. Journalistic bloggers are emerging. Crowd-sourcing and volunteer reporting are gaining momentum. Social media floods us with breaking news, even real-time, on-the-scene alerts on events such as the Boston Marathon bombing.

The closed systems, the inward-looking systems, are collapsing. The open systems, the outward-facing ones, are growing. There are thousands of new digital companies born each year with billions of dollars in venture capital, many of them looking to be the new curators, verifiers and platforms for news and information. They seek to be resources for talent. They are well designed, continuously interactive and looking in earnest for the personalities, digital and otherwise, of the niche communities they seek to serve.

Once we get caught up in this new age, some believe news flows will rearrange themselves and new business models will eventually emerge. But tomorrow is not today. In the meantime, we can't solve our most difficult problems without journalism that holds society accountable. We don't know if our communities will become worlds of extreme distrust or vibrant social action, whether they will be hyper-connected or broken apart by sharp class divisions. We do know, however, that the future requires transformational leaders in news with the courage to try new things, not folks who have played the survivor game at their news organizations and just don't have anywhere else to go.

The digital age demands a new focus on filters and context, on not just verification but also curation and interpretation. It needs people who want not to dismember systems piece by piece but start over with a new design. We need to listen to news people like Larry Kramer, who argues in his book "C-Scape" that since every company is now a media company, curation is a job that can't be ignored. We need to find the people today who are ready (as visionary journalist Bob Maynard was two decades ago) to describe their news organization as "a geographically discrete dynamic database" and "an instrument of community understanding." Were he alive today, Bob likely would have said newsroom transparency is mandatory, and that knowing enough about where we live to help our neighbors see why journalism matters is not a lofty goal but the very least we can do.

This is an updated version of a talk presented at the Logan Symposium on Investigative Reporting at the University of California at Berkeley.

Why journalists should like the #opendata movement

As a young reporter I went each week to the police station to copy the crime log. When there were patterns of burglaries or violent crimes, I did full stories. But the crime log itself was news. I carefully typed each item, no matter how small, on my manual typewriter. At 2:30 a.m. Thursday, a naked man was seen walking down Miller Avenue… The crime log was a popular standing feature in the weekly Mill Valley Record, as they are to this day in many American newspapers.

The log was public information. Police could keep investigations confidential, but the crimes themselves were public record. In the digital age, that sort of data can be released directly to everyone with a device to catch it. Through our Technology for Engagementinitiative, in fact, Knight Foundation supports governments and others that want to better inform and engage communities. In addition, the Knight News Challenge for Open Gov, as well as grants to the TheGovLab, OpenElections and Textizen, focuses on improving the ways citizens and government interact with or without journalists as the “middle men.”

Many journalists just aren’t paying attention to how governments are opening up data. Part of that is cultural. Governments do keep secrets. As the amount of information grows, so do the secrets. Good journalists, operating ethically, try to ferret out the secrets that should be public. We often find ourselves, with the help of such organizations as theReporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the National Freedom of Information Coalition, suing the government, forcing it to obey its own open records laws. In addition, news organizations and state freedom of information groups tenaciously demand better open government laws.

Journalists see so many efforts to hide public information that they start to think everyone in government is a scoundrel. That's not always so. Governments are becoming big digital age publishers. Today the city of Mill Valley publishes far more civic information than its long-gone weekly newspaper ever could. Instead of declaring such data "not good enough," or ignoring it, journalists might become experts on these emerging forms, even encouraging and assisting government when it does the right thing. Strong flows of data are the seeds of good journalism and of public engagement that solves problems.

Data is technical — and journalists are word people. Unfortunately, many of us can't passthis basic math test. Computer-assisted reporting was seen for too long as a special skill taught only by Investigative Reporters and Editors. But now, all reporting is computer-assisted reporting. Newsies who have learned to embrace data find rich returns in readership. The Global Editors Network celebrates data journalism with a major contest.

Here are some things about information flows all journalists should know:
Since its launch, the Code for America Commons has grown from a small collaborative experiment in civic innovation to a thriving database with (as of fall 2013) 661 apps used in 382 cities.
Cities such as Philadelphia are creating "chief data officer" positions, people who could be a journalist's best friend.
A growing community of innovators is sharing digital citizenship successes such as the gameCommunity PlanIt in Boston, which got more people involved in schools.
Does this mean we should no longer care about secrets? Not at all. We still need such campaigns as Sunshine Week, which shows how open government helps all Americans.

We absolutely need to keep suing and calling for better laws.

Carrots and sticks together might be a better way to move society's most stubborn animals. Many journalism organizations still support the philosophy of open government and the values of great journalism; they are ready to fight the good fight. But the old school champions try to do it with sub-standard websites, no mobile apps and no collaboration with partners such as the Sunlight Foundation, the Digital Library of America, the Knight-Mozilla fellowships and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab.

A few groups are trying new things, such as the Reporters Committee, which helps people get access to public meetings or records. But that's not enough. We need to agree that the only real solution to freedom of information is technological. Liberals are a little more liberal with public records. Conservatives are a bit more conservative. Yet neither side releases much more than half of what it should. Government systems need to be redone so all public information is public from the moment it enters the system. Since these are computer systems, that means freedom of information advocates, along with journalists in general, need to be tech savvy. It also means we need to find new ways to work together to open up ways for people to interact with lawmakers.

In a perfect world, governments would release all data. In the real world, cities, states and agencies say they do not have the money to replace their vintage computers. The next best thing is for news sites to display government datasets, using such tools as Deep Dive from the University of California at Berkeley. Journalists who post all the data can still ferret out stories but also let their communities dig in and get their hands dirty. The Texas Tribune's searchable datasets are the most visited part of the site (especially for the salary figures of public servants.)

The new world holds as much for journalists as before, maybe more. If I were a reporter in Mill Valley today, I'd try to know everything about city data: what was online; whether it was accurate; what wasn't there, and why. I'd put on my digital sunglasses and curate it, filtering to see what's there. I'd post my own data sets when others can't. Most importantly, I'd find a way to engage the town in conversation about what it all means. I'd try to connect the data and events of daily life to the issues and ideas of a better world.

This article was posted originally on Knight Blog.

Ready for 'open journalism'?

Miami's winter breezes are usually refreshing, but a season ago particularly so, thanks to a discussion paper from Melanie Sill for the University of Southern California. Influential journalists are apparently talking more seriously about a basic question of the digital age: How can they move beyond just informing communities to truly engage them? Former Sacramento Bee editor and senior vice president Sill concludes that professional journalism can indeed be "transparent, responsive and enriched through vibrant two-way connections with a networked universe." In "The Case for Open Journalism Now," she details open, collaborative approaches taking hold at news organizations across the country.

What's Open Journalism? I'd describe it as trading up from the industrial age one-way assembly line model of mass media to the 21st century two-way networked system of communication — the information world in which most of us live. The open approach

turns lectures into conversations. It honors not just our nation's need to know but also its need to tell. It means newsrooms define communities not as "the great unwashed" but a collection of many voices struggling to be heard.

This is a CMYK color bar and chart used to calibrate color printing. The letters stand for Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black. Even today, color computer printers use the same system.

Open journalism equals diversity. When journalists properly engage their communities, stories about women, people of color and many other groups are far more accurate and far less stereotypical.

Sill's discussion paper is a worthy product. It allows for public comment and has more than100 "ideas, arguments and illustrations for open journalism." Most refreshing is Sill's concession that this is not a new idea. It is simply made ever more practical by today's technology. She credits the Oakland Tribune for its "open newspaper" practices of the 1970s and 1980s. More than a decade later, in the 1990s, some civic journalism advocates claimed that they pioneered a "movement" by pushing for papers to engage with communities. The Tribune's leaders would never have tried to claim such a thing. What they did was read journalism history. Before a handful of corporations bought up America's newspapers and started rotating editors town-to-town like so many traveling

salesmen, community newspapering was a story of engagement. Knowing the past helped the Tribune's owner, Bob Maynard, better see into the future.

Sill's hope (and mine) is that the time for open journalism has finally arrived. Perhaps all the crowd-funding experiments, ranging from the early Spot.us to today's Kickstarter, as well as crowd-sourcing projects such as Public Insight Journalism will serve to prove the point.

This article originally was posted on Knight blog.

What community foundations say about local media ecosystems

hen we held the first Media Learning Seminar in 2007, some of the community foundation leaders looked a bit puzzled. Hundreds of them had come in the winter to visit Miami but not everyone was sure why. Knight Foundation had invited them, as representatives of America's more than 700 local foundations, to talk about what we saw as troubling trends in local media. Back then, the journalism weather was stormier in some communities than in others.

Community foundations are ways for people to invest in the future of their communities. They have boards that reflect the towns in which they exist. They take in donations, often large ones that grow their endowments. They make grants to support causes their donors and boards believe will improve local life.

At our first meeting with them, Knight staff did a lot of talking. News and information, we said, is just as important to communities as good schools or safe streets or clean air. Excellent journalism can help a community solve problems. Without it, problems fester.

So I told the story of the little Deerfield Forum, a volunteer citizen website created by that town's Friends of the Library with a $25,000 micro-grant from Knight via J-Lab. The library volunteers had been concerned because their local elections were not drawing any candidates for public office. No one seemed interested in solving local problems. Perhaps, the library volunteers thought, it's because there was no newspaper to report them, no bloggers debating them. So the friends decided to report and write their own news stories about their little New Hampshire town.

Here is The Forum's pledge:
To report the news with accuracy and objectivity and treat people with respect.
To provide content to help citizens make informed decisions about local issues.
To facilitate community debate.
To furnish an opportunity for creative expression.
To correct our errors in a timely manner.

Any journalist might agree with those points. Bear in mind, though, these are volunteers. They just wanted to help their town — and they did. Once the information started flowing, things in Deerfield started happening. The number of people running for public office went up. Voter turnout went up. Next election, the same thing happened. Then it happened again. Seven years after its 2005 launch, The Deerfield Forum is still going strong. Its founder went on to win a seat in the state legislature.

At times, only in a small town can you clearly see big things. For decades, scholars have

debated the relationship between information and community engagement in our democratic republic. But the importance of local news is not something they debate in Deerfield. It's something they practice. They know their volunteer journalism matters.

None of us predicted at that first conference that the recession of 2008 and 2009 was coming. We didn't see it. But it did confirm what we were saying. The collapse in value of America's newspaper companies was unprecedented, stunningly so. Suddenly, you could buy a share of New York Times stock for less than it cost to buy the Sunday edition of the New York Times. When the U.S. Senate's Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation held a hearing on the future of journalism, Knight President Alberto Ibargüen testified about the digital age paradox in local news. "A high school student can more easily access information about swine flu or the crisis in Darfour than corruption in city government or decisions about education in his town.

After that, the tone of the Media Learning Seminar changed. No longer were there any puzzled looks. No longer did Knight Foundation staff do most of the talking. The meeting became a place that community foundations could tell each other what they were doing about America's crisis in local news. For the 2010 meeting, to confirm that we were on the same page, I worked with Esther Thorson from the University of Missouri to survey the foundation leaders.

I retold the Deerfield story, adding that some big city folks might object to the beautiful simplicity of the lessons of the little New Hampshire town that brought democracy back from the dead for the whopping sum of $25,000. Chicago and Detroit are not Deerfield, and urban ecosystems are more complex, more like a run through the rain forest than a stroll through the park. So such leaders as Terry Mazany of the Chicago Community Trust and Mariam Noland of the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan were

right to ask tough questions. Our cities face big challenges, they said, and our journalists need to be tigers.

For the first time I brought up an example I've used many times since. The Texas Tribune, like the Deerfield Forum, didn't exist in the 20th century. Its digital news site launched in November 2009, with $3.8 million in philanthropic support and professional staff. It focuses on state politics. One early story had the state rethinking the funding that was keeping dangerous day care centers in operation. Another had hospitals admitting that they were sending baby blood smears without permission to be part of the federal DNA registry. The Tribune won a new Knight grant to refine its model. It has a strong business and technological staff to go along with its journalists. We hold it up as proof that the new digital nonprofits have a real chance. In anybody's rain forest, from the start the Tribune has been a tiger.

Why all this talk about media ecosystems? Because thinking about news and information that way helps us see how it really works. Community foundations are used to a local media dominated by daily newspapers. Local dailies may indeed be the tall trees in the forest. But they aren't the only trees. There are weekly papers, ethnic papers, alternative papers, free papers, monthlies, newsletters, magazines, radio, TV, and now blogs, websites and social and mobile media.

In this information environment, when anyone who is networked can create as well as consume news and information, we have city hall websites, nonprofit websites, church and school and library websites, to name only a few. Yet despite all the digital diversity, there are some trends that apply, some laws of the jungle. Here are some of them:

First, information consumption keeps growing. Statisticians from the University of

California at San Diego and elsewhere report that information consumption by a typical American adult now takes up 12 hours a day. How is that possible? Anyone with children knows how. People today consume more than one form of media at the same time.

Researchers working for Microsoft were among the first to study this. One called it "continuous partial attention." If you are listening to the radio, reading work email and talking on the phone, that counts as triple. If you did that all day, you only need four hours to consume 12 hours' worth of media. Whether we like it or not, multi-tasking is here to stay.

Next, traditional media keeps shrinking. There's no simple way to say it. All the new media competition means that fewer people are watching traditional local TV news or network TV news or reading the daily newspaper. Does this mean no one cares about news? No. Online users of news are rising fast.

Third: It's all about the money. Many daily newspapers have larger audiences online than they do in print. So why can't they make more money? Because the economics of digital advertising are different. Online ads bring in less than a tenth of the money that print newspaper ads used to bring in. Every year, print advertising falls. The World Association of Newspapers said that most of the world's media executives believe that by 2015, most of their revenue will need to come from online sources. But North American editors, perhaps still suffering from their addiction to print advertising, don't think they will need to get as much of their revenue digitally. Unfortunately, the American editors are wrong.

Finally: Digital is here to stay. Media consumption becomes more digital with each

generation. This is true in any developed country. Since these statistics were collected, digital media has become even more important to the young. Older folks prefer television and newspapers. Choice of form or mode of media happens at a young age and stays with us.

If we've agreed that media is in transition, let's take a look at a community media ecosystem in the context of what foundation leaders see. Obviously ecosystems vary from place to place. We've drawn our basic ecosystem elements from the report "Informing Communities," by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities. It was the first major commission to look at news and information since the creation of public broadcasting. In Appendix One, the report says, a healthy community should have eight things going for it.

They are:

1. Most government information and services for my city can be found through a clear, easy-to-use portal. Of the community foundation leaders we surveyed, more than half said their towns or cities did not have such a portal. This is disturbing for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that government information belongs to the people. If the government does not put the public's information on the Web in an accessible way, how is civic life supposed to happen? In our ecosystem graphic, we'll turn the stream black to symbolize a lack of a good public information flow.

2. Government in my city offers public information openly and holds meetings openly. Most community foundation leaders said, yes, that's the case. So on our ecosystem map, we will leave the sun turned on. (As a former newspaper editor, however, I need to observe that this perception, though valid, is at odds with Sunshine Weekresearch, which says as many as 80 percent of the local governments violate their own open

records and meeting laws.) But we're describing a community foundation ecosystem experience here, so no change in the map.

3. Quality journalism in your city: growing in volume, shrinking or staying same? Seventy-five percent of the community foundation leaders surveyed said the news stream is shrinking. (When we had asked the leaders before the media meltdown of 2008-2009, only 41 percent of them said quality local journalism was shrinking. Hence those puzzled looks at the first Media Learning Seminar.) To symbolize the decline in these community institutions that have been there for a century or more, we'll color the trees black in our local ecosystem map.

4. Local websites on which ordinary citizens can discuss and debate community events and issues. Yes, a slim majority of community foundation leaders agree there are local websites and other digital venues for debate. But the vote is close. In our ecosystem map, those tweeting birds symbolize debate. We'll need to leave a few birds in and take some out.

5. Vibrant libraries or other centers at which people can learn digital literacy and get access to the Internet. Absolutely, community foundation leaders said, by a clear and strong majority, we have libraries and other places at which people can learn to get on the Internet. Still, in a fourth of the communities, this is not the case. That would be like a fourth of America not being connected to roads. Even so, most of the leaders felt good about their libraries, so we'll keep our frog jumping in the ecosystem map. Libraries and other community centers may be a place on which to build.

6. Easy to find information on issues I think are important, such as health, jobs, the environment, arts and so on. Mostly, community leaders said no, they didn't have that

easy-to-find information. Quality of life information is important, of course. Everything doesn't have to be investigative reporting. Some projects might tell people what's going on that they want to know. News you can use. It's the underbrush in our ecosystem map, and because the leaders said it's not there, we'll remove it.

7. The schools teach media literacy. Many have no idea what their schools are doing, but those who have an opinion said no, there isn't enough teaching of media literacy. From the reports we have seen, we would agree with the foundation leaders on this. The Knight Commission said digital media literacy should be taught in all schools, but that still hasn't happened. There's still a lot of teaching to the test. The test, by and large, doesn't care if you know civics, news literacy or any of the things we hope citizens of the 21st century will know. In our map we'll get rid of the rocks and clouds.

8. High speed, affordable broadband accessible by everyone. By the largest margin in the entire survey, community foundation leaders said this just had not happened. Seventy-six percent said they didn't have universal broadband. Of all the survey items this is the one that's a bit out of date. (If we were to do the survey again next year, the White House would say, we'd see a picture of broadband everywhere.) But having connections is not the same as using connections. The poor, the elderly and rural America are second-class citizens regarding broadband. So what should we wipe out in the ecosystem map to symbolize broadband adoption? The sky.

What these foundation leaders think matters, since they control $50 billion in endowments, and make at least $4 billion a year in local grants. To review: Government portal, no; open government, yes; journalism shrinking; debate isn't vibrant; little quality of life information; libraries are good; no digital media literacy and no universal broadband.

The first graphic below shows a healthy media ecosystem, according to the Knight Commission, and the second shows what community foundation leaders said their local media ecosystems actually look like.

Who turned out the lights? It's safe to say the nation's community foundation leaders don't have the most positive views of their local news and information systems. The good news is that this analysis presents the lowest common denominator. In any given community, there may have been more strong points than shown here, places on which to build.

Community foundations are giving more to local news and information than they used to and planning to give even more in the future. What are the smart things they are doing? They are increasing their own communications capacities as well as their grantees, experimenting with new digital approaches and sharing their learning, making more detailed maps of their own community media ecosystems. No matter what they want to accomplish, community and place-based foundations know they need healthy news-and-information ecosystems to do it.

UPDATE:

This is an updated version of a talk presented at the annual Media Learning Seminar for Community Foundations as part of the Knight Community Information Challenge. Further advice for foundations can be found in the booklet "Journalism and Media Grant Making."

A local affair

hen Knight Foundation first started working with the National Endowment of the Arts on the issue of arts journalism, we asked four questions: Is arts journalism in trouble? Does it matter? Can anything be done to help? How can we — the Knight Foundation, the nation's leading private funder of journalism innovation, and the National Endowment for the Arts, the nation's leading advocate for the arts — improve the situation? Let's look at the questions and answers:

1. Is arts journalism in trouble?
Nationally, arts journalism is doing well. Locally, it is not. Nationally, the medium of film is an example of the positive post-Internet trend. Even as film critics shrink in traditional media, the victims of the new economics of the digital age, they are blooming in cyberspace. As the film critic Roger Ebert reported in the Wall Street Journal article, "Film Criticism Is Dying? Not Online" :

"The Web and HTML have been a godsend for film criticism. The best single film criticism site is arguably davidbordwell.net, featuring the Good Doctor Bordwell and his wife Kristin Thompson. Their names are known from their textbooks, studied in every film school in the world. But they are not users of the obscurantist gobbledygook employed by academics who, frankly, cannot really write. They communicate in prose as clear as running water."

In communities across America, however, the story is quite different.

ArtsJournal.com editor Douglas McLennan estimated that in 2006, roughly 5,000 people covered arts beats for American newspapers. Now, he believes, that number has been cut in half. This rate of cutback would be higher than average. The American Society of News Editors census shows that in the past decade, one in three newsroom jobs has been lost.

Even more than community journalism, traditional local arts journalism in the U.S. is going through a messy digital transition, often disappearing in many communities.

Reported former Orlando Sentinel theater critic Elizabeth Maupin in her article for Harvard's Nieman Reports, "A Journalistic Vanishing Act":

"Intelligent Internet journalists are taking up the slack, at least in some cities … websites exist for theater, books, art, dance and other kinds of music, and more are springing up all the time. Yet many of those sites don't pay their writers, and most struggle to make ends meet. In many cities, especially smaller ones, substantive blogging has not sprung up to replace what has been lost. "

2. Does it matter?

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy would say it does. News and information, the commission said, is as important to community well-being as safety, the environment, education. In fact, quality flow of news and information is necessary to determine how a community is progressing on any issue.

Like news, the arts are a type of glue that can bind communities. A Gallup Research project funded by Knight Foundation, Soul of the Community, shows that three things

strongly connect people to their communities: openness, social offerings (such as concerts and other arts events), and aesthetics, such as beautiful parks. Prosperous communities tend to have more of the types of people who feel this sort of attachment.

How can a community appreciate the benefits of the arts without quality news and information telling them who is doing what, what's available and what people are saying? Or without providing critical reviews and features on artists and their craft and demonstrating how the arts serve as a catalyst to better our lives?

3. Can anything be done to help?

Journalism in America does not need to be saved, the Knight Commission says, so much as it needs to be created. Rather than embark on a search for the past, the commission urges us to look ahead.

This means being neutral about the delivery mechanisms of news. If, as Pew Research indicates, digital news is becoming more personal, portable and participatory, then the question becomes: How can arts journalism do this? How can it be mobile, customized and interactive?

Arts journalism has instructive parallels to other endangered forms of specialty journalism. As traditional media makes the difficult transition to digital media, perhaps the largest "missing journalism" category is investigative reporting. What investigative journalism is to self-governance, arts journalism is to community life. Both are specialties involving reporters trained to reach the highest levels of understanding. But both are fields of personal engagement and interest. Americans have strong opinions about how they should run their lives and their communities. This opens the door to

new forms of community engagement in arts and investigative journalism. Unfortunately, like investigative journalism, arts journalism has been easy to cut.

As investigative reporting has dropped out of daily newspapers, individuals and communities have been willing to donate funds to see it done in new digital formats. Nonprofit news sites have popped up in almost every state. Their funding varies from state to state. But a 2011 study by the Investigative News Network shows that these startups have fared better than the average business startup and the average nonprofit startup. I think this is because the journalists running them do not think failure is an option. More importantly, I think it's because what they are doing is important.

The ultimate future of these new nonprofit sites, like the future of news itself, is uncertain. Despite their small staffs and fragile budgets, they are providing thousands of investigative stories seen by uncounted millions of people. If what Harvard professors call the "creative destruction" of our traditional news systems is only a temporary event, and the commercial side eventually corrects itself, these sites will have provided crucial watchdog content to help the transition. If the structural changes affecting journalism are permanent, and some content no longer has commercial support, period, then these sites are at least a start toward a solution.

In this light, what's interesting about arts journalism is that, unlike investigative journalism, the arts are already supported by economic systems. No one buys a ticket to go to the city council meeting. But every day, people purchase tickets to see exhibitions, theater, dance and musical performances. Under their own power, arts providers have banded together to create new information hubs on the Web — they see it clearly in their best interest. This offers economic and partnership possibilities beyond what we are seeing in investigative reporting.

4. How can NEA and Knight show their interest and concern?

NEA and Knight have funded university-based programs to train traditional arts journalists. In past decades, such programs helped train new staff when traditional news organizations were adding reporters. New arts reporters always benefited from additional training. The model worked well when traditional journalism was growing. But in recent years, as traditional journalism has cut back, Knight and NEA became concerned about training people for jobs that no longer exist. So we've taken a break from that approach.

NEA and Knight already have a history of working together on ArtPlace, a place-based program to help revitalize arts in communities across the country, with federal and philanthropic leaders. This raised an obvious question: Is there an equal to ArtPlace for arts journalism? Could Knight and NEA partner in a Request for Proposal process that would allow the eight resident Knight Communities to propose new forms of arts journalism?

The Knight communities represent a cross section of America, living laboratories in which news and information experiments can be tried. The foundation has tested this topic with its arts program site, KnightArts.org. The site receives significant Web traffic.

We wanted to be as open as possible to new ideas: To collaborate with unusual partners and try new approaches, proposals that achieved arts-journalism goals and others, such as education. These projects would improve the flows of arts journalism in communities and have a good chance of sustaining themselves.

So we decided to hold open contests in the eight Knight communities, hoping that winners and runners up would represent the sort of fresh thinking the Knight Commission calls for. Our hope was that a contest would encourage new arts news techniques, technologies and networks of the future.

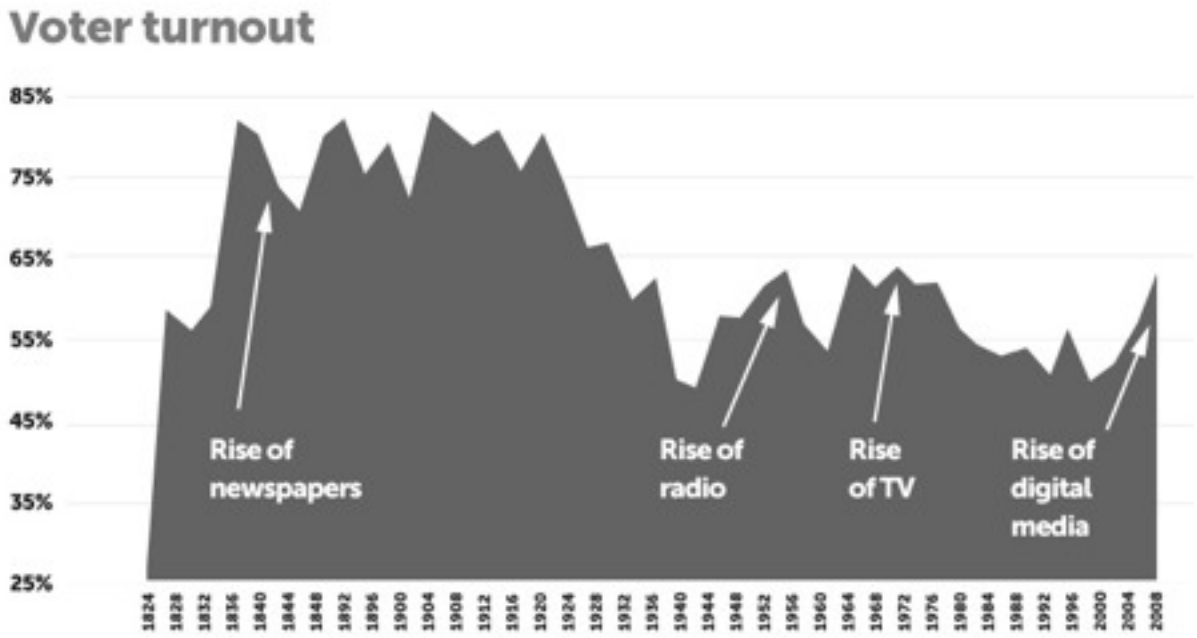
Plenty of people lament the disaggregation of news that leaves specialty reporting fending for itself in the Digital Age. But to the entrepreneurial minded, this is a time of great excitement. In the era of creative destruction of traditional media, we can emphasize creation.

That's how the Community Arts Journalism Challenge came about. Given the extraordinary numbers of entries and the excitement generated by the winners, we're glad we did it. The Charlotte Arts Journalism Alliance links five major media players, including the Charlotte Observer, with the University of North Carolina to increase arts coverage in the city. CriticCar is gathering citizen reporting on the Detroit arts scene. Art Attack is increasing arts coverage in a partnership between the Philadelphia Daily News and Drexel University.

UPDATE:

This article originally appeared on Knight Blog. After publication, the National Endowment for the Arts announced that the arts journalism contest was so successful that NEA would add journalism grant making to its regular local arts grant-making program. Here's one of the winners of that program, the Macon Arts Alliance.

Does a rising new form of media encourage presidential voting?



Our great political scientists may not agree with this, but perhaps a few other scholars might want to take a look. From George Mason University, via Wikipedia, the graphic above shows presidential election turnout in the United States for the past two centuries.

There are four notable upward spikes in U.S. election turnout: 1820s-1850s, which coincides with the rise of the mass circulation newspaper; 1920s-1940s; which matches the rise of radio; 1950s-1960s, matching the rise of television, and the mid-1990s to today — the rise of the World Wide Web and digital media. (Plus two mini-spikes in

presidential voting, after the Civil War, when the American illustrated magazines rose, and just before the turn of the century, when big city papers rose.)

Historic upticks in American presidential voting happen to match the rise of new forms of mass media. Is this coincidence? I doubt it. Yet I am not saying that the rise of popular new media forms caused the spikes. I am theorizing that the rise of a major new form of media is an ingredient in a complex recipe that in the end results in more presidential voting. In fact, the same underlying social conditions that caused the rise of the new media forms might also be responsible for the rise of presidential voting.

Connecting the early press to engagement

In his book The Creation of the Media, Pulitzer Prize-winning Princeton scholar Paul Starrargues that in the early 19th century, there was a tight relationship between political activity and newspapers. The first political parties inspired “party newspapers,” which accelerated the growth of the penny press, making newspapers cheap for all, which accelerated party activity, and so on.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political thinker who studied America in the early 19thcentury, wrote, “If there were no newspapers there would be no common activity.” Our great poet Walt Whitman said: “America is a newspaper-ruled nation.” Abraham Lincoln, as a young postmaster, read newspapers from all over the country, using them to master America’s emerging democratic language, a speaking style that interested people across the sprawling country.

In the 1920s to the 1940s, during the rise of radio, the second major spike in presidential voter turnout occurs. Many would say it’s because women got the vote in 1920. Others would say it was because of the big issues of the day, such as the New Deal.

Others might say President Roosevelt's radio-broadcast fireside chats played a role. What if it was all these things? A new group of voters exposed to big issues and a president's message coming into the home via radio news?

This is the chain of events that could make the rise of a major new form of mass media an ingredient in a presidential voting spike:

1. Because the emerging medium is new, a lot of Americans pay attention to its novelty, including some who don't normally vote;

2. Since the new medium carries news, the pool of people aware of that news, including political news, increases;

3. Some people who didn't talk about politics before start doing just that;

4. Savvy politicians realize they can use this new media to increase turnout by targeting potential voters;

5. The politicians reach a wider audience, either by political parties dominating newspapers, presidential fireside chats via radio, live televised presidential debates or a president dominating social and mobile media;

6. It works. Voter turnout increases as new media consumers become politically active, but…

7. It only works for a few elections, because eventually, the rising medium is no longer novel, and the pool of potential voters settles back to normal.

Can I prove any of this? Not a word. It is a hunch. Yet isn't this pattern just too odd to be a total coincidence?

Columbia University Sociologist Michael Schudson says that scholarship suggests the rise of TV and the Web is linked to greater political interest, but that it is still in the realm of theory.

We are experiencing the fourth big spike right now so it's a good time to study the rise of presidential voting, particularly among the young, and the emergence of digital media, popular among the young. The first version of this article was posted on Knight Blog before the 2012 election, and I predicted then that voter turnout might again increase or at least youth voting. In fact, the youth vote, as a percentage of total vote, increased one percent in 2012, surprising the experts.

The hunch that emerging mass media forms, new and on the rise, can make a big difference, came out of a talk I gave at Arizona State University, showing that every American generation has grown up with a different form of media on the rise. My hope was that the talk would help today's journalism students seize the day and relax into new information delivery worlds such as this one.

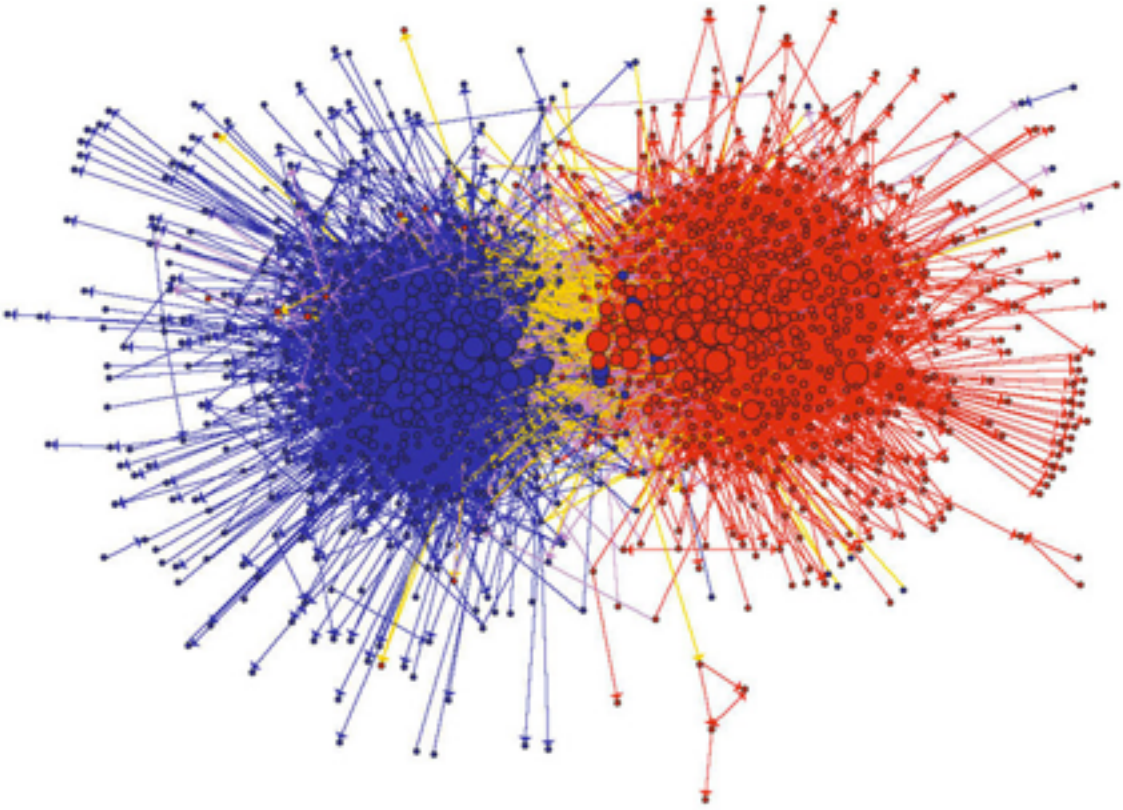
Could social and mobile media keep presidential voter turnout soaring? Probably not. But the new forms keep coming faster and faster. Who knows what the next wave will be, and which presidential candidate will rise up to exploit it?

A bad idea that lingers

Traditional news media have made a destructive mistake by encouraging anonymous comments on their websites. But this bad idea can still be eliminated. The 2012 election — probably the greatest digital political event in American history — would have been the perfect opportunity to change things. Yet another opportunity that slipped away. The election turned out to be one of the nastiest, most negative and least factual ever. (The Wesleyan Media Project reports presidential election ads on television were 70 percent negative in 2012, up from 9 percent in 2008.)

Anonymity brings out the beast in us. Steven Clift, founder of E-Democracy.org, has a long experience with political debate, which has led him to two simple rules: real names and no name-calling. Letting your comment section turn into a sewer weakens the reputation of a newspaper or any other fact-based business. What's more, allowing it is just unethical. Professional journalists grant anonymity to sources only when there is no other way to get important information. That same ethic should apply to newspaper Web comments. Only leakers should be anonymous. I've been arguing for years that the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics, untouched since the Web took hold, should be updated to deal with our digital dilemmas. The Poynter Institute is on the right track with its event on "the new ethics of journalism" and the book by the same name.

A map of the political blogosphere showing how liberals link to liberals, conservatives to conservatives.



Credit: Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance

Anonymity doesn't need help. MIT Center for Civic Media director Ethan Zuckerman talks about the graphics of "the political blogosphere." Actually, there are two spheres: a liberal sphere and a conservative sphere. Only a tiny center wants to link to people of both persuasions; the rest of them just want to sink into their comfortable cocoons. Traditional media used to think they could provide the bridge between the factions. My mentor, Bob Maynard, said those bridges should be "structures of integrity" — held together by facts, civil discussion, real people using their real names to make constructive and useful comments, being able to withstand social earthquakes because, with mutual respect, they would bend and not break.

Clift's post, "Civility Online: Why are you hurting America?," hopes media leaders will wake up. As he has noted: "Major media made a huge mistake when they bought into the idea that 'no one knows you're a dog online' was a good thing. Now they are throwing up their hands wondering why the jerks they are empowering by design are acting like animals."

Real people, real debate, real democracy. Some newspapers, radio and television stations already are moving in this direction, using Facebook for commenting or requiring registration to post comments. We can add millions of new facts to the next election cycle with one simple decision: go with open, transparent, civil debate. Go with real names.

UPDATE:

After this Knight Blog post, the nation's largest newspaper group, Gannett, switched to Facebook registration for Web comments. The McClatchy group and others followed; even The Huffington Post said it would switch. But some mainstream brands, and many younger and alternative brands, are staying with anonymity.

An experiment: Journalists take time to engage with a community

A journalism convention came to South Florida awhile back, and its leaders actually set aside some time to meet community leaders. I moderated. It was a joint convention of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Radio and Television Digital News

Association. It was in Fort Lauderdale. From the start, you could see the “community engagement lunch” was long overdue.

Local residents learned about the daily realities journalists face. They learned that both organizations have strong codes of ethics. The journalists learned that community members have longstanding issues and media outlets seeking credibility as a source of news and information must address them.

We started by looking at the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities. Did the locals and journalists agree that news and information are core community needs? They did. Had they noticed the digital-age growth of traditional media’s advertising-based model and the resulting local journalism cutbacks? They had.

Then we got into it. Here were the major topic areas: ‘Identify sources whenever possible’

Community members said they are on the side of the journalists who oppose anonymous comments on traditional media websites. They said they won’t comment themselves because of all the hate mongering. Good point. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says journalists should “always question sources’ motives before granting anonymity.” The Radio and Television Digital News Association code advises: “Identify sources whenever possible.” Yet many news organizations do the opposite. They neverquestion the motives of readers who comment on their websites. The comments remain anonymous. They do not “identify sources whenever possible.” What is the point of having a code of ethics if journalists ignore it?

When real names are required, conversation becomes civil. But no technology can guarantee all names will be real, observed Howard Saltz, editor of the Sun Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale. Some people will always fake an identity to get in. True, but major news organizations like the Gannett newspapers, have switched to Facebook registration and found other ways to require real names. When they do, bigoted name-calling falls off fast, and people are more likely to post thoughtful comments.

Half a story now, half later

One-sided stories are a real problem, said Mary Ross Agosta, communications director at the Archdiocese of Miami. The 24/7-news cycle creates "frustrating" situations when reporters post part of the story now and the rest later. Unfortunately, many people never see the second version. Mohammad Shakir, director of the Asian-American Advisory Board, talked about another harmful shortcut: how wire service stories written by people outside the community can contain stereotypes and factual errors that would not have been there had the story been done locally. These are valid issues, and again, fly in the face of ethical values journalists promote. Resisting the temptation to be first when being right is more important — that is a constant struggle. Perhaps hearing the damage that wrong stories can do can help us do the right thing more often.

Of cats and trees: Where's the good news?

Several community members said there just was not enough good news in the media, that every story seems to have a villain. Too often that assessment seems to be true. As Walter Cronkite used to say, it's not our job as journalists to cover all the cats, just the ones that get stuck up in the tree. Clearly, Walter would have been shocked to see the millions watching lol cats on YouTube, with almost none of them stuck up in trees.

What happened? In the old days, journalists had to cram the news into small packages, limited by the size of the paper or the newscast. Since we could cover only one cat, it was the one that needed a spotlight, the one up in the tree, the one we needed to get down. The other cats were boring. But the world of finite journalism was smashed two decades ago with the World Wide Web. Now, a newspaper or television station can use as much Web space as it wants. YouTube covers all the cats, not just the ones in trees. Traditional media still gets hung up on the tree thing.

Tell us what you are up to

Community members and journalists agreed there should be a lot more transparency. News organizations should explain how they operate, making sure phone numbers and other contact information is easy to find, even putting codes of ethics on their websites so the public knows they exist. We also agreed that cable news, at least in recent years, is giving people the impression that everyone in journalism has an agenda and no one cares about the facts. Yet there are times (believe it or not), when a journalist's stance is that he or she actually has no stance. This is not a "view from nowhere," as some might say. It's a view from wherever you need to be to call it the way it is, the way a referee dances around to find just the right angle to see if a player's foot stepped out of bounds. If you are that sort of journalist, there's nothing wrong with saying so.

What's more, when there is an overwhelming amount of evidence on one side of a question, that's what people want to know. They can smell something wrong with the false idea of "balance" that for every fact you have to run around and find someone to dispute it.

Whose problem is this, anyway?

Shrinking local news staffs in recent years are pushing more journalists into covering topics they do not know much about. Yet we need reporters with expertise, community members said. Could community groups help, we asked, by putting more general information on their own websites? Some are, but they admit they could do more. TheBroward County Sheriff's Office, for example, has its own radio show (they interview reporters about what they think of stories in the news as well as how they do their jobs). Commander Michael Calderin summed up the idea this way: "Whose responsibility is it to care about community news and information? Everyone's."

Scott Leadingham, director of education for the Society of Professional Journalists, developed and co-moderated the Fort Lauderdale lunch. He believes these "open sessions" should continue. At first, he had worried it would become a gripe session, putting the journalists on the defensive. But it did not. He was pleased with the quality of the conversation. These sorts of sessions, he says, "need to happen all over the country." Congratulations, Society of Professional Journalists!

Kenny Irby also thought the conversation was a success, which is saying something. Irby is director of community relations and diversity at the Poynter Institute, the top journalism training organization and home to News University. Irby offered to help duplicate the Fort Lauderdale session. It reminded him of the "time out for diversity" events he did in the late 1990s, with one important difference.

These days, if community members do not like the local news, they can do something about it. They can beef up their own websites, and go out and publish news of their own and tell traditional media to take a hike. If there were no other reason, that alone makes community engagement an essential element of local news reporting. Yet finding any

news organization interested in the techniques of human-centered design, of understanding exactly what needs journalists are trying to meet, is difficult.

UPDATE:

Since this article originally appeared on Knight Blog, the Sun Sentinel won journalism's highest honor, the Pulitzer Prize Gold Medal for Public Service, for articles revealing reckless, harmful speeding by law enforcement officers on South Florida's highways. The paper still posts anonymous comments. The Society of Professional Journalists decided against holding a community engagement session at its 2013 convention. It was as though the Fort Lauderdale meeting never happened. "Culture," as business guru Peter Drucker once said, "eats strategy for breakfast."