Drinking from the fire hoses at **Future of News** and **Civic Media Conference 3.0**

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL

MIT Building 15

The clever young men and women at Massachusetts Institute of Technology are adept with their hands as well as their heads. Feats such as depositing a fire truck atop the Great Dome or running a solar-powered mockup of a Boston T car along the rim have earned them major style points in the pantheon of pranksters. One of the most heralded came in 1991 when students hooked a fire hose-cum-hydrant to a water fountain outside a big lecture hall, recalling former MIT President Jerome Wisner's chestnut that "getting an education from MIT is like taking a drink from a fire hose." Today a replica of their jury-rigged device is proudly displayed like a museum piece in the lobby of the Stata Center, a Frank Gehry creation that itself has been punked (to resemble Waldo).

Attending the Knight Foundation's third Future of News and Civic Media (FNCM) Conference at MIT on June 16-18 certainly was like drinking from a fire hose – two fire hoses, in fact: the torrent of information and ideas from the workshops, barcamps, and show-and-tells from News Challenge winners and MIT Media Lab wizards, and the second, simultaneous gusher of Tweets, blogs and other electrons flying over the internet. It was, as one participant put it, an "enormous brain dump" for the 200 digerati, journalists, social media mavens and academics attending the conference, most with Macbooks tucked under their arms (you might as well have written a big, red "L" on your forehead with a Sharpie if you brought a PC laptop as I did). Many of the 200 participants multitasked through the 2½ days, Tweeting on their laptops and iPhones and instantly capturing almost every memorable thing that was said. The conversation was joined outside MIT as well, with voices

weighing in from Guatemala, Britain and beyond. There were immediate write-ups on the Knight Foundation's web site, on the Nieman Journalism Lab's blogs, on Huffington Post, in the New York Times and more. Past News Challenge winners – nearly 50 were there – weighed in. Much of the best reportage and commentary came in 140 character bursts from such News Challenge insiders as Jennifer 8. Lee (@jenny8lee) and Chrys Wu (@MacDivaONA, a handle that succinctly tells you where her head is), both judges of the 2010 contest; from current and past winners such as Ian Bogost (@ibogost), Kristofs Blaus (@kristofsblaus), Amanda Hickman (@amandabee) of Document Cloud, Rich Gordon (@richgor) of the Medill School at Northwestern, CUNY interactive journalism professor Adam Glenn (@aadamglenn), and David Cohn (@digidave) as well as the Center for Future Civic Media's own Christina Xu (@chrysaora),. The winners and their projects by now have been profiled in dozens of places. What's there to add? Well, let me take you directly into the stream of the fire hoses at FNCM 3.0.

Community building
with a ball of yarn

Tuesday, June 15, Stata Center

Tom Grasty and
Nonny de la Peña

Working with Post-Its
Brad Flora (Real time Ads)
at a pre-conference
workshop for the 2010
News Challenge winners

They flew to Boston without knowing for certain that they had won. "I'm sure you were slightly mystified as to why you were invited today," Mayur Patel, Knight's director of strategic assessment and assistant to the president, told the 18 proprietors of the winning projects at a June 15 retreat inside MIT's Ray and Maria Stata Center on the conference eve. Now, they knew something was up. All had been asked to submit high resolution photos weeks earlier, their plane tickets and rooms at the Cambridge Marriott were booked and paid for by the Knight Foundation, and they had even gotten a chance a few days earlier to vet the one-page write-ups that would go out in the press packets. But their coronation as winners of the fourth News Challenge was not a done deal until the Knight Board of Trustees signed off, and that did not take place until Monday June 14, at a board meeting in Miami. When Retha Hill, director of the New Media Innovation Lab at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, changed planes en route from Phoenix and picked up a message to call the Knight Journalism Program's Jose Zamora, she wasn't sure if he was calling with good news or to tell her to turn back.

But it was worth the suspense. A $2.7 million payday awaited them in Boston. They were the sole survivors of a competition that began with 2,500 applications from across the United States and around the globe. Nine received grants ranging from $200,000 to $400,000, and three got $74,000 to $90,000.

The winners mustered a day early in the whimsical Stata Center, dubbed "a geek palace" by Wired when it opened in 2004 to house computer science and the artificial intelligence lab. They spent Assessment Day doing team building exercises, being schooled on how to set strategic goals and learning how Knight and the consulting firm Blueprint r+d would measure their progress. The exercises designed by

the Blueprint team including throwing a ball of yarn across the room every time they heard something connecting someone else's project to their own. Soon the cat's cradle of yarn was stretched every which way across the room. They wrote goals on Post-Its, slapped them on poster boards, made elevator pitches and critiqued each other's plans. A Blueprint consultant exhorted them to set "big, hairy audacious goals."

Nonny de la Peña and Tom Grasty had just such an outsized ambition for the start-up they conceived as graduate students at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Their enterprise, Stroome, is a web-based video editing platform that will allow users to edit and remix their video on the web from laptops and cell phones and post them on YouTube, Facebook or even on the air in nothing flat. Stroome is a Dutch word meaning "to flow" that de la Peña, a former Newsweek correspondent and documentary filmmaker, and Grasty, a media strategist and former advertising man, came across in plotting their start-up. They envision journalism schools as early adopters and, down the road – this is the really BHAG – displacing the TV satellite trucks at breaking news scenes. De la Peña, now a senior research fellow in immersive journalism at USC Annenberg, says the idea for Stroome was born from the frustration of trying to pull together video and sound at the last minute for a package she wrote and produced for The New York Times on sounds made by exotic fish.

Chicago journalist and internet entrepreneur Brad Flora unabashedly summed up his short, medium and long range goals on three yellow Post-Its: "People make money …. People make more money …. People keep making money." Now he's got a quarter-million dollars from Knight to build his "NowSpots" software, which already allows Chicago businesses to post ads in real time on Flora's Windy Citizen web site from their Facebook pages, Twitter and blogs. Windy Citizen is a Chicago news aggregator and community sounding board that Flora launched weeks before earning a master's degree at Medill in 2008. It's a local version of Digg, with Chicagoans' deciding the top stories of the day. Flora, 28, has had to scramble from the start to keep his enterprise (him, a half-time sales rep and unpaid interns) afloat. It was 16 months before the Windy Citizen sold its first ad, he tells me later. His income that first year was $11,000, mostly from building web sites for other people. "That was hard. That was a very difficult and very lonely time," he told me. He couldn't afford a plane ticket to attend his Princeton class's fifth year reunion in May 2009, so he drove and slept in his car in a campus parking lot until friends let him crash in their hotel room. But people also believed in Flora. The interns signed up because he had a reputation as a good boss, mentor and someone filled with ideas for the post-internet media world. And now, in addition to Knight's $250,000, he's got validation.

Marcis Rubenis and Kristofs Blaus
The guys from Riga present their winning project (GoMap Riga)

Inside State, Flora outlines his "nefarious" plan to make the press (especially Slate and TechCrunch) "decide we're cool because that's how you get people to use your stuff." NowSpots will give advertisers an alternative to banner ads that nobody reads and nobody wants to buy, he says. "This is the core product: How do we make ads for local publishers that don't suck?"

At Wednesday's news conference, Flora will don his black-and-orange Princeton tie and deliver an even better elevator pitch. At Windy Citizen, he says, "we ran into the same problem that every other journalist that goes and tries to start a new startup runs into. You have to eat." It was great that Chicago residents were posting news and talking up a storm, "but without money coming in the door, it wasn't going to last too long."

Flora's isn't the only inspiring story in the room. Two young lads from Riga, Latvia, Kristofs Blaus and Marcis Rubenis, who have also gotten $250,000 for their community-building website they call GoMap Riga, which will display what's going on in the Latvian capital, pulling content directly from Twitter and Facebook feeds and residents' contributions of news, video and pictures.

Neither has had time to finish college yet, and Rubenis is back living at home with his parents. But even before hitting the News Challenge jackpot, both have met success

in competitions for student entrepreneurs and, in Blaus's case, the real world. The 22-year-old Blaus is already a serial entrepreneur whose start-up, Creative Mobile, which provides IT solutions, marketing strategies and services to clients in the Baltics and Finland, has a staff of 10 (six fulltime) and revenues of $150,000-plus a year. The Latvian Investment and Development Agency named him one of the country's most promising young entrepreneurs. He only pays himself $1,000 a month. "I don't take much out of my company. I just put it all back. I'm just 22. I don't have kids, I don't have any mortgage payments, I don't have anything," said Blaus. He does have a red, 3.8 liter 2004 Ford Mustang that he splurged on last year (it cost $8,000). He comes from a family of literary translators and journalists. His heroes are Steve Jobs, Richard Branson and "I'm crazy about Obama." He and his fiancé are getting married on September 18, a date chosen "because 18 is some sort of lucky number for me. I was born on May 18 and the last day I am working is May 18, 2018, that's when I turn 30 and that's when I drop working and I go movie directing." I raise an eyebrow. "Really. No shit," he adds.

Rubenis, 25, is a grassroots organizer and cognoscenti of social media. His bio says that he initiated the first non-governmental organization (RGO) network in Riga and co-founded an "IdeaCamp" that seeks to crowdsource answers to business and social problems. He tells me later that he is near the finishing line on his bachelor's degree. "I just have to finish my thesis," he said. Tomorrow, our MIT host, Chris Csikszentmihályi, will describe this affable duo "the Car Talk guys of Latvia." I explain to Rubenis afterwards that these are two wise-cracking radio personalities, both MIT graduates, who run a car repair shop and dispense advice about cars and life on public radio. "It's perfect. It's very me," Rubenis responded. "If I would have graduated MIT, I would still do what I want to do."

Eric Rodenbeck
The Stamen Design founder
(CityTracking) works while
fellow News challenge winner
Ian Bogost looks on

GoMap Riga, already on the web in beta in seven languages, describes itself as a "local information and democracy portal." It aspires to give "every citizen … an opportunity to easily participate in the development of Riga, know what's happening around, express their ideas and implement their own initiatives." That pretty much defines what the News Challenge is all about.

Here at Assessment Day, Blaus and Rubenis finish each other's sentences, like some long married couple. Blaus explained that with GoMap Riga, "communities connect on local issues and make the world better …"

"Their city or their neighborhood that they care about," interjected Rubenis.

"The local place they care about," Blaus agreed. They hope to expand GoMap quickly to five more cities.

"At least," said Rubenis.

"At least," echoed Blaus.

Their short-term goals are to draw 10,000 visitors a day to GoMap and generate 100 Tweets. "GoMap is currently zero users but Facebook is millions. We want to access those millions of people and get them on GoMap," said Blaus.

The lads are excited, but also exude confidence. Later when I ask if they felt intimidated, Rubenis tells me, "We certainly belong because we've done really interesting and quite awesome stuff in Riga and Latvia …. We worked on (the application) like we should win. We didn't play around." Blaus said, "We're very busy guys. We didn't want to do this (just) for an application. We wanted to win it from the very beginning."

There are other compelling biographies in this room: Eric Rodenbeck, the founder and creative genius behind Stamen, the San Francisco design studio known for its artful visual maps of everything from police blotters to the

Olympics to museum galleries; globetrotting photographer Teru Kuwayama, a Knight Stanford fellow, cofounder of Lightstalkers.org, a global self-help network of unconventional travelers; video game savants and designers Ian Bogost and Michael Mateas, who have day jobs at universities; Hill, the Arizona State professor who did pioneering interactive work for washingtonpost.com and for Black Entertainment Television network; John Davidow, a top executive of Boston's powerhouse public radio station, WBUR; Jake Shapiro, another public radio guy, the executive director of PRX, the Cambridge-based Public Radio Exchange that brings us "This American Life" and other goodies; Michael Wood-Lewis, an engineer and community organizer whose Front Porch Forum has made the virtual town hall a reality in Vermont; Philip Neustrom and Mike Ivanov, two math majors from the University of California, Davis, who built an incredible Wiki for their college town, and Eric Gundersen, an economist and international development strategist who wants to make it easier for journalists and everyday people to embed maps on their websites and in their blogs.

They will get to share their stories with the world tomorrow. In the meantime, Assessment Day ends with a cocktail party in the lobby of the quaint Kendall Hotel (a converted Victorian firehouse). We are left to our own devices for dinner, albeit on the Knight Foundation's dime. I take the T to Kenmore Square and connive my way into sold-out Fenway for the last three innings of a Red Sox game. Dinner consists of an Italian sausage from a vendor on Yawkey Way. The next morning I ask my new friends from Riga what they did for dinner. "We went across the street. We had lobster," replied Rubenis. They had discovered Legal Seafoods, not by chance. A friend in Latvia had counseled them "that when you come to Boston, you eat lobster."

"Communities connect on local issues and make the world better …"
— **Kristofs Blaus**

Nonstop chatter and a coming out party

Wednesday, June 16

Alberto Ibargüen

It may be a misnomer to call Wednesday afternoon's announcement and show-and-tell by the News Challenge winners the high point of FNCM 3.0. It is a coming out party, but the real main event is the nonstop, floating conversations taking place at every hour in the corridors, alcoves, hallways, and classrooms of MIT Buildings 14 and 15, the old and new homes of the Media Lab and the Center for Future Civic Media. People are distributing and collecting business cards by the dozen, keying email addresses into iPads, iPhones and other devices, and picking each other's brains. There are also workshops, barcamps, two plenary sessions and demonstrations by MIT professors and grad students of their tech wizardry and adventures in social engineering. But anticipation is high as all 200 of us gather in the big auditorium under MIT's Great Dome. Josh Stearns (@jcstearns) of Free Press and SaveTheNews.org notes that Room 10-250 *"looks like an Apple announcement event - MacBooks everywhere."*

Knight President Alberto Ibargüen tells us, "When we started the Challenge, we really couldn't have imagined this room." They knew four years ago that the world of media was in "complete upheaval," he said, but it wasn't clear what would take its place. The contest was born out of that uncertainty and the foundation's determination to continue the Knight "tradition of serving the information needs of communities through an attempt to present full accurate and contextual search for truth." The Knight president first played videotaped cameos of each of the winners, quipping, "It will be interesting to see if it resembles what we gave them the money for." He added kudos and commentary, too. Eric Gundersen's TileMapping project has "nice synergy with Ushahidi," the crisis mapping platform that proved so useful after Haiti's earthquake and won a News Challenge grant last year, he said. When Jake Shapiro of PRX says StoryMarket – a partnership with Spot.us to let listeners choose story topics

and help fund the reporting – will put "listeners like you" in charge, Ibargüen kids him, "'Listeners like you?' Jake, did you invent that phrase all by yourself? Way to go; take what you need." Teru Kuwayama's project to embed photojournalists with the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines in southern Afghanistan and share their photos on social media with the Marines and their families "is actually phenomenal if you think about military control of information in the field," he said.

When the cameos are done, Ibargüen tells the audience something they are waiting to hear. The News Challenge is entering the fifth and final year of its original, $25 million life span, but Ibargüen says, "I can assure you that there is every expectation that in one form or another …. we will remain committed to experimentation in the field." You can almost hear the fingers flying across keyboards to send out that Tweet.

Now the winners get to deliver their elevator pitches again in person. The waggish ("vuvuzelas during the plenary sessions only") Csikszentmihályi, the artist and innovator who directs the Center for Future Civic Media and the Computing Culture group at the Media Lab, instructs them they each have three minutes. "I've got a stopwatch here which is merciless and I have a Taser by the chair there." He actually does have a Taser, presumably not charged, but impressive nonetheless. Almost all the winners hew to the time limit, except the exuberant duo from Riga and Kuwayama.

When Rubenis and Blaus rise, they jointly hoist the clear, glass News Challenge trophy over the heads like wrestlers' holding up a belt. The audience oohs.

"We rehearsed that," said Blaus, who is wearing suspenders over a shirt.

"Twice," chimed in Rubenis, in a checkerboard sweater.

"Okay. We come from Latvia. It was a 14-hour flight two days ago and we like it out here," his partner began. He explains why the world needs GoMap. There are lots of connections on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, "but in the real life, we're not as connected to real events about real things in our cities and our communities." GoMap Riga will give people a place to weigh in on everything from park cleanups to whether to let skyscrapers be built in old parts of the city. "Sounds like a good idea, right?" said Blaus.

These two charmers rabbit past the three-minute mark, the four-minute mark, the five-minute mark.

Christina Xu, outreach coordinator for the Center for Future Civic Media, sends her boss and everyone else an urgent Tweet: Don't tase the Latvians, bro!

Finally, after 5½ minutes, a Taser-less Csikszentmihályi nudges them off.

Other winners also make deep impressions.

Stamen's Eric Rodenbeck, for once with his hat off, tells of wanting to make "beautiful, interesting and accessible" tools to help cities, journalists and citizens fashion maps and graphics and convert dry municipal data into stories. CityTracking will make maps and other visual data about cities "as easy to move around as photos on Flickr."

Michael Mateas, a University of California, Santa Cruz, associate professor who works on videogame design and artificial intelligence, says the Cartoonist will allow journalists to make cartoon-like games from current events "without having to be game designers or programmers." His partner, Georgia Tech videogame designer, critic and researcher Ian Bogost, says, "The idea of a news game is a videogame that does journalism." It's a way to draw readers in to serious news with soft content, the same way that newspaper readers get sucked in by the crossword, the comics or the sports page.

Journalists are in the minority among these News Challenge winners – Brad Flora, John Davidow, Teru Kuwayama and Nonny de la Peña by my account. There's a half dozen computer scientists, web designers and engineers. Philip

Ian Bogost and
Michael Mateas

"When we started the Challenge, we really couldn't have imagined this room."
– Alberto Ibargüen

Neustrom and Mike Ivanov are software engineers who were undergraduate math majors at UC Davis when they decided that Davis needed its own Wiki. It grew into an online compendium of information with thousands of pages that Neustrom said covers "every facet of life in Davis … from finding lost pets to researching city council candidates to catching con artists." It is "entirely community maintained. There's really no structure to it," he said. Nonetheless, it's "the largest media source in Davis," with half the 65,000 residents using it and one in seven actually editing entries during the course of a year.

WBUR's John Davidow, perhaps tempting the wrath of the gods, called the News Challenge grant for Order in the Court 2.0 "just another father in our cap" since the station a day earlier won a Radio Television Digital News Association Edward R. Murrow Award for excellence. Davidow has arranged with Massachusetts court officials to run an experiment in live streaming from the courthouse in Quincy, Massachusetts. The pilot could lead to ground rules for live blogging and live streaming of proceedings from court rooms across the state and the country, he said. While cameras were introduced into courtrooms in the 1970s, "not much has changed in the last 40 years," he said. "The President's press secretary tweets. You can watch the legislative branches on C-SPAN. Basically the courts are still in the dark."

Engineer Michael Wood-Lewis already has 25 Vermont towns and 18,000 subscribers using his community news site, Front Porch Forum, and with Knight's money, he intends to expand that tenfold. The people who post on Front Porch Forum get "fantastic results. Babysitters are found, cars are sold, potholes are filled, city councilors are held accountable."

"The Afghanistan generation doesn't watch television, so this in a way is an experiment to see if social media is going to be our point of entry for this war."
–Teru Kuwayama

Teru Kuwayama

Several Tweets went out on that last sentence.

Kuwayama, who just finished a Knight Fellowship at Stanford, tells us that, "Afghanistan just took the title from Vietnam for America's longest war." (more Tweets) Television brought the Vietnam war into the American living room, but most Americans are "utterly clueless" about this one, he said. "The Afghanistan generation doesn't watch television, so this in a way is an experiment to see if social media is going to be our point of entry for this war." Kuwayama tells me later he was invited to join the deployment of the Marine infantry battalion by a major who remembered his photograph's from an embed six years ago. Kuwayama drew laughs when he shows his own rudimentary world map ("data visualization") to illustrate how his social media sharing project will work. To those who think that is too simple, he offers "the U.S. military's plan" – a complex schemata stuffed with lines, boxes and arrows. Then he flashes a photo of what he calls "the most effective military strike in modern history": the second hijacked plane crashing into the burning World Trade Center. "It was executed against the most powerful nation in human history and it was pulled off by 19 guys carrying $3 box cutters," he said. I think there's a lesson in there somewhere for us that this does not require building necessarily new technology, it does not require new systems. What they did was they picked up the tools that were lying in front of them and they walked through the front door. I think that's the approach that we're going to take on this project."

Kuwayama's One-Eight project sparks lots of Tweets with favorable comments, although one blogger in Michigan says she felt a little "uneasy" about his invoking the 9/11 attacks.

I ask Kuwayama later if he opposes the U.S. war in Afghanistan or war in general. He says he is by no means a pacifist, but believes the country needs a more open debate about the conflict. "My mother lived 500 feet from the World Trade Center. I was lucky she wasn't home that day. I personally believe that we have strategic and humanitarian reasons to be involved in Afghanistan. I also think that we

need to think clearly about how we do that," he said. "I don't think that there's any clear path. I think the best thing that we can do is have people who disagree with each other talk to each other and hash it out."

It was CitySeed's turn. Retha Hill recalled that, "Years ago, people would join a garden club or the Kiwanis Club or the Lions Club or something like that to figure out how to improve their communities." What her CitySeed smart phone application aims to do is to let people plant geotagged seeds of an idea for civic improvements – such as beautifying an ugly bus stop -- on a web site, get others to add their suggestions and create enough buzz that it actually gets fixed.

While all this was going on (for 80 minutes), the conversation on Twitter revved up.

Adam Glenn tweeted at 2:52 p.m., "Knight seems emphasizing data visualization w/new awards, calling it '1 of most promising new areas of digital journalism.'"

In St. Petersburg, Florida, Steve Myers of the Poynter Institute, the managing editor of Poynter Online, sent out a "Twitter list of 2010 News Challenge winners," allowing all to follow the winners' tweets with one click. There were lots of congratulatory tweets to the winners; de la Peña sent one herself that began, "Yowwee!! Stroome.com wins … Collaborate and remix on Stroome!" Kristofs Blaus tweets, "Okay, we have won it!!!!!!" complete with a picture of his hand holding the translucent trophy. Ian Bogost tweeted pregnantly, "Michael Mateas and I are at the Knight News Challenge winners announcement at MIT." Back in Phoenix, Leslie-Jean Thornton, a.k.a. "the News Chick," a colleague of Retha Hill's at the Cronkite School, tweeted, "Whole lotta happy dancing going on at #fncm." Jose Zamora tweeted the winners' names one by one. Chrys Wu, a.k.a. MacDivaONA, pumps out tweets with capsule descriptions and links to the winner's web sites. There's a vocabulary lesson from Rich Gordon: "What's in a name? Stroome from Dutch 'Stromen,' meaning 'to move freely' -- ideas, points of view and content." Paul Bradshaw, a journalism professor and blogger in Birmingham, England, tweets that this is "easily the strongest year yet," David Cohn of Spot.us fame puckishly retweets it with the observation, "- I say 2nd best year ;) but I'm biased."

There are some brickbats as well, including a few calling individual projects derivative. One guy says the winners' biographies are better than their ideas.

Gary Kebbel, the outgoing major domo of the News Challenge, calls it a "wonderfully diverse group." There are dissenting voices on that point. From Guatemala, Kara Andrade (@newmaya), tweets at 3:34 p.m., "The face of innovation is 80% men." She links to a News Challenge set of winners' photos showing 16 men and two women. Andrade, a UC Berkeley journalism grad and former community organizer for Spot.us, is now a Fulbright fellow building a cell phone-driven citizen journalism site in her native Guatemala.

She gets retweeted, but this thread does not pick up much steam. Mathilde Piard, (@mathildepiard), the social media manager for Cox Media Group in Atlanta, calls the winners "way cool," but two days later weighs in again with, "Just noticed, little after the fact, that there are only 2 wmn out of 17 KNC winners (more obv when I saw photos)." She quotes a buddy who told her on gChat, "I like the projects, but can we get a little more estrogen up in this hizzouse?"

Retha Hill, director of Arizona State University's New Media Innovation Lab, and Cody Shotwell (CitySeed)

I raised this topic in separate interviews with Hill, one of those two female winners, and contest judges and journalists Jenny 8. Lee and Chrys Wu, both polymaths about the media and technology worlds.

Hill was not surprised how few women won. "Looking at the winners over the past four years, there haven't been a lot of women getting these prizes …. If you look at a lot of journalism innovation awards out there, there's not a lot," said Hill, who noted minorities are a distinct minority at Online News Association conferences, too. "I have always tried to be a pioneer. I'm doing what I love, which is new media development." She added, "I think that women and minorities have to give it a try." The News Challenge comes down "to the power of the proposal," not who submitted it, she said.

Lee, the former New York Times reporter and author of "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles, said that there would have been a third female winner had she not chosen to withdraw her proposal at the last minute. "The applicant pool is actually very, very diverse," said Lee, who was the chief judge. Lee, who read every application and personally interviewed eight of the 12 winners, knew nobody's race and could only infer gender by name. But this gender disparity is "definitely something I'm thinking about," she said. Compared with the diversity of newsrooms, the News Challenge roster of winners is "probably not great, but comparing (us) to entrepreneurial, techie start-ups, we're actually probably batting far above average."

Wu said the predominance of white men "happens everywhere; it's not just news innovation. Most CEOs of major corporations are white men …. For some reason, if you're looking for the people who are leaders of (a) community, a lot are men." Sounding the same note as Retha Hill, Wu said, "I think that women should step up and just say, 'You know what? I'm going to try this. I have an idea and I think it's good, period.' We can't have more women winners if there aren't a lot of women applicants."

Kim Fox (@KimFoxWOSU), a journalism professor at the American University in Cairo, tweets, "Along w/women, it seems the international contingent was left out of the Knight News Challenge winners list." A third of the applications came from overseas; Africa alone accounted for one in 10. But like 80 percent of all applications, most washed out in the first round. In the end, only the lads from Riga were left standing.

I've never covered a conference like this before with one eye on the Twitter feed rolling into my laptop. It's exciting and absorbing as well as a hoot. The Times' David Pogue has aptly described how Twitter "messages scroll up your screen, like the transcript of a global cocktail-party conversation." But it's more than cocktail party chatter. Eventually, over the three days and beyond, there are more than 1,900 Tweets about #fncm. Watchers grab every arresting quote and raise every issue I could think of, and more. What reporter wouldn't want to hear this quadraphonic conversation?

When we break at the end of the 80-minute news conference, I ask Knight Vice President Eric Newton which project he likes most. "You can never tell at this point which ones are going to turn out to be amazing next year. They all look like embryos in a sonogram," he replied.

"I think that women should step up and just say, 'You know what? I'm going to try this. I have an idea and I think it's good, period.' We can't have more women winners if there aren't a lot of women applicants."
— Chrys Wu

Crowd Building
and Data into Action

MIT's Chris Csikszentmihályi
and NYU's Gabriella Coleman

Photo by Teddy Link for the
MIT Center for Future Civic Media

There's lots for this crowd to learn at the two plenaries, first a Wednesday session on "Crowd Building" with New York University anthropologist Gabriella Coleman and Harvard Business School management professor Karim Lakhani, and then a "Data into Action" plenary Thursday where Ellen Miller of the Sunlight Foundation, open government evangelist Laurel Ruma of O'Reilly Media, and Nick Grossman of OpenPlans, a nonprofit trying to make cities more livable, tell us how they and their organizations are trying to do just that.

"Crowd Building," as Csikszentmihályi explains to us, is a play on crowdsourcing, the portmanteau coined by journalist Jeff Howe in a 2006 Wired article ("The Rise of Crowdsourcing"). Think the wisdom of crowds + outsourcing. Howe, who is in the audience, defined crowdsourcing as "the new pool of cheap labor: everyday people using their spare cycles to create content, solve problems, even do corporate R & D." The professors are going to explain how widely scattered bands of volunteers pool their expertise to produce and sustain open source software and solve business and social dilemmas. With crowdsourcing, "you don't always know the people who are contributing, but they're out there somewhere," said Csikszentmihályi.

Case No. 1 is the Debian community, which he calls "almost a sect" that has produced 28,000 packages of free software, including a popular way to distributing the Linux operating system. "If crowdsourcing is like quick sex, Debian is more like a really long marriage … with children and lots and lots of fights," he said. It is also "a rock solid piece of engineering" that has proved useful to NASA scientists because of its dependability. How do they do that?" he asked.

Coleman summarizes what she has learned from 10 years of research on what makes this Debian community tick. Part of it is "a passion for hacking," she said, but it is also a passion for ethical standards for code writing and sharing. She expatiates on the elaborate social contract and protocols that have sprung up for determining which of these free software geeks can attain the rights and status of becoming a Debian "new maintainers." While perceived as "freewheeling libertarians … severely allergic to institutions," they have actually built institutions of their own "despite rhetoric to the contrary," she tells us. @laura47 tweets, "debian is more successful as they screen people more and have more barriers to entry, gets more institutionalized."

Lakhani has done extensive research on how government, businesses and foundations use contests to spur innovations in science and product development. An electrical engineer by training, he co-founded the MIT Open Source research community while earning his Ph.D. in management. It's late in the afternoon, but Lakhani knows how to hold the class's attention. He shows a celebrated clip of a crowdsourced SuperBowl commercial for Doritos. Two brothers from Indiana beat out national ad agencies with their "crystal ball" spot. To get free Doritos, you just hurl the ball and break the glass in the office vending machine. PepsiCo, which owns Doritos, also has come up with new, best-selling recipes for potato chips (crisps) in England with a contest that drew 2.5 million entries.

Lakhani asked the audience how many had used Wikipedia in the past week. Every hand went up. Then he asked how many had consulted Microsoft Encarta or the Encyclopedia Britannica. Nobody. The crowdsourced Wikipedia, he said, was a disruptive innovation that flummoxed even Bill Gates and his Encarta team. Lakhani asked us to imagine being in Gates' Microsoft boardroom 10 years ago when Encarta had

one, although covered channels run along the floor. I tap the shoulder of Christina Xu, who's sitting in front of me. The outlet's in the arm rest, she whispers. Duh. A minute later a Tweet arrives from @Chrysaora: "BTW #fncm, there's power on the left side of the arm rests of all of your seats in 10-250!" Dharmishta Rood (@Dharmishta), a past New Challenge winner, retweets her with four words of approbation: "so useful and non-obvious."]

Data into Action

The question on the table at the second plenary is how to turn data into positive social change. Csikszentmihályi introduces three social activists who do this for a living: Miller, Ruma and Grossman.

Miller's feats inside the Beltway are remarkable. She founded the Center for Responsive Politics, which continues to bare the secrets of where politicians' campaign money comes from, and she is co-founder and executive director of the Sunlight Foundation, which crusades for government transparency and accountability. Knight is one of Sunlight's funders. She's brought not only a prepared text, but a jaw-dropping slide presentation tool made by prezi.com that makes PowerPoint look like a Tin Lizzie.

Turning data into action "is what gets us up every morning," says Miller. Sunlight is using "the power on the internet" to demand that government information be made available online and in real time, "however and whenever people want to use it." It isn't public if it's in a government warehouse or the basement of the Justice Department. Transparency legislation is only part of the solution, she said. "You can't legislate how government thinks about what they regard as their information …. We need to invoke a cultural shift, not only in government, but in the body politic." Sunlight works on many fronts to pry open those locked government cabinets, and it has one Google group that has attracted 2,000 techies who are "hacking away at government data." This work affects people's lives, she said. Public interest groups and journalists have scoured government databases to unveil

Britannica on the ropes. A young developer would have been fired if he'd suggested firing all the Encarta editors and opening it up to the masses, but Wikipedia did just that, he said.

Lakhani cheekily uses Robert Langer, perhaps MIT's most famous professor, as a whipping boy to make the point that knowledge is widely distributed. Langer is a biotechnology legend, holder of 600 patents, author of 1,100 papers, "the most cited engineer in history," according to the biography on the MIT Langer Lab site, and "the smartest man in Boston," by the Boston Globe's say-so. Lakhani flashes a slide showing Langer's output on tissue engineering, surrounding by the contributions of two dozen other prolific authors (> 25 papers). But then he flashes another slide of what looks like a close-up on gray bacteria. It represents the 17,044 authors who published 6,131 papers in this field between 2004 and 2006. Bob Langer's dot may be bigger than all the rest, but it is still infinitesimal. Depending on the question, you might "be better off going to somebody on the peripheries of this network," said Lakhani. He reminds us of Joy's Law, from Sun Microsystems co-founder Bill Joy: "No matter who you are, most of the smartest people work for somebody else." He also talks about the popular and successful Threadless weekly competition to design and sell T-shirts. It's harder to win a Threadless contest than it is to get into Harvard.

It's 5:30 p.m., we still have a half-hour to go in this plenary and beyond that a 50-minute "lightning round" of demos by Media Lab and CFCM grad students and scientists on their pet projects. But the Tweets start flying when Lakhani summarizes what he's found in studying science and product development contests. Female scientists are less likely to entire competitions, but more likely to win. The men may be overconfident and the women are "not trapped in the dominant view of the scientific world" since they may have been discriminated against and kept from the choicest jobs, he hypothesizes. In contests that draw scientists from different fields, those operating farthest from their area of expertise were the ones most likely to solve the problem.

[An aside: the power on my laptop is ebbing. I look frantically around 10-250 for a power outlet or strip but cannot find

the history of violations at the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia where 29 miners perished in April and in BP's woeful drilling operation in the Gulf of Mexico. Miller spelled out Sunlight's credo for open data. Data must be:

• Complete and available online
• Collected at the primary source
 "with the highest possible level of granularity"
• Timely
• Accessible and available in real time
• Machine-readable
• Available to all
• Non-proprietary
• License-free
• Permanently stored

"Information becomes more valued as it is shared, less valued as it's hoarded. Our role as citizens is only as strong as our government is open," said Miller, adding, "In the age of Facebook and our smart phones, we have rising expectations of greatly expanded access to this kind of information. Government information for us is the gateway drug to democratic renewal."

Laurel Ruma's title at O'Reilly Media, the technology guide publisher and convener of tech conferences, is Gov 2.0 evangelist. She co-chairs its Gov 2.0 conferences and seeks to expand the ranks of technologists, citizens and civil servants committed to using technology to better serve the public. "For us, data is awesome. We love data. What we're talking about right here is government as a platform," much as Apple's iPhone was a platform and "creative playground" for the developers who built 500,000 applications for it, she said. Ruma offered ground-level examples of how this works, from San Francisco to Denver to Boston, where municipal officials have released data and invited the public to come forward with ideas on everything from bus schedules to construction permits to tapping traffic cameras to let people know how much snow has fallen. "The developer community loves data" and contests to harness data for civic purposes, Ruma said. Contests such as Apps for America, Apps for Democracy, Apps for the Army and even Apps for Healthy "are telling the

American public, 'Here's your data. Make it awesome. Tell us what you think matters.' This then drives an innovation economy," she said.

Ruma said the "hated" Massachusetts Department of Transportation offered developers a "golden Charley card" – free rides for a year – to hackers for their best ideas. One was a $200 LED sign-plus-networked computer telling riders what time the next bus was coming. An ice cream store in Cambridge installed one for its customers. "This helps the person without an iPhone. Awesome," said Ruma, who estimated it might have taken Mass DOT $10,000 and two years to install a sign on its own.

This prompted a sardonic Tweet by the Cartoonist's Ian Bogost, who seldom needs all 140 characters to make his points: "Gov 2.0 is buses and ice cream."

I mention this later to Ruma. "People criticize bus data, but it's a start. It shows other agencies what they can do," she said. Separately, I ask Bogost, the videogame designer, if he isn't living in a glass house. He takes the point. "At rock bottom, everybody's job looks absurd, I guess .... I field a lot of criticisms about how can games be a serious way to do anything." Bogost, whose research on where games and journalism intersect has been funded by Knight, said he sees the role of journalism "in this overwhelming, data-rich world" as trying to synthesize information and make it relevant to people's lives. "I don't really care where the buses are. I may care about the relationship between public transit and the health of my town or city," he said, but knowing where the bus is "so you can buy an ice cream cone is not a compelling, long term story."

"you can use the really personal, low level data and engagement activities to connect to the more significant stuff."
– Nick Grossman

Nick Grossman said OpenPlans is a non-profit technology organization in New York City with a staff of 50, including 15 reporters who write online about technology and civic issues. It builds open source software and consults with city agencies on technology, strategy and software development. Grossman detailed several transportation-related projects in New York, Los Angeles and Washington dealing again with issues of varying social significance, from where to place bike racks to finding taxis. Grossman believes "you can use the really personal, low level data and engagement activities to connect to the more significant stuff." Grossman gave a shout out to Joe Edelman, who was one of the News challenge reviewers, for his work on GroundCrew, which uses mobile technology to help people organize for social action and other activities.

For the News Challenge community, Grossman saved the best for last, announcing OpenBlock, a $435,000, Knight-funded initiative to improve upon the EveryBlock code that Adrian Holovaty left behind when he his municipal data collecting and publishing enterprise to MSNBC. OpenPlans will work with the Boston Globe and the Columbia Daily Tribune in Missouri to create tools to enable news organizations of all sizes to more easily harvest and publish hyper-local news and data.

Csikszentmihályi gave the panel a benediction, saying it "gives you a sense of the amazing work that's happening from the quotidian to the really remarkable."

Barcamps

We spent eight of the conference's 20 hours over three days in workshops, barcamps and other settings hearing about experiments in civic media. The 18 barcamps – "user generated conferences" is the Wikipedia definition -- were on topics that conference goers themselves had suggested and volunteered to moderate. You had to choose which three to attend. Barcamps, Csikszentmihályi reminded us, are only as good as participants make them. You could only attend three in the time allotted; I chose Mark Glaser's "News Challenge Winner Collaboration/Conversations Between Conferences," Mark Surman of the Mozilla Foundation's "Keeping the Web Open For the Next 100 years," and Josh Stearns' "Successful Newsroom Collaborations."

In Glaser's group, which drew 20 people, the consensus seemed to be that Knight needed to do more to help winners collaborate than just bringing them to Cambridge once a year and getting them to blog on Glaser's Media Shift Idea lab. Someone suggested that six-figure incentives for collaborations be written into grants. The Sunlight Foundation's Miller was incredulous. Collaboration is hardwired into the open source community, said Miller. "It's shocking that grantees would think it's Knight's responsibility to require or reward collaboration. I would think you would see the value in your own work," she said.

David Cohn of Spot.us, whose work is built around collaboration, said, "There has to be a focus or a project that you can rally around. At a certain point you're going to get diminishing returns." It's impossible to get 50 people to drop everything else and work on a group project for the next two months, he added. "I'm always about helping and participating, but at the same time once we're out of conference mode and running the email hamster wheel … there's only so much you can do."

After the barcamp, Alicia Cytrynblum, president of Periodismo Social, an NGO that works with newspapers in Argentina to encourage coverage of human rights, approached Joe Edelman of Citizen Logistics who has his hand in many civic news projects and experiments. "You made CouchSurfing? I made you famous in Argentina," she said, explaining that 14 newspapers ran an article she furnished on the global network that links travelers with local communities. Edelman was one of the original programmers.

At the second barcamp, Surman, executive director of the Mozilla Foundation, said, "Our mission is to guard the open nature of the internet." Surman wondered aloud whether the thousands of volunteers the Mozilla Foundation attracts to build its open source browser Firefox and other software could also help those trying to find new ways to report and deliver the news. "We certainly think that having information people believe in as valid and trustworthy is totally important to the future of the web," he said. Josh Stearns of Free Press, a participant in this barcamp, commented on the difficulty of getting people to understand the importance of keeping the web open.

Afterwards, we headed down the hall to Stearns' barcamp on "Successful Newsroom Collaborations." David Cohn chooses this one, too, taking notes on his MacBook that he later turned into an Idea Lab blog, "Newsroom Collaborations: The New Culture of Sharing vs. Competing," which is widely disseminated and retweeted when Glaser posts it the following week.

I'm taking lots of notes, too, because I've lived through the go-it-alone era when big papers could ignore a story with impunity if they didn't break it themselves, and unscrupulously repurpose smaller fry's scoops for their own columns.

Stearns closed the discussion by asking, "Do we need institutions to help make collaborations possible? Do they need something to take off?"

It's an open question.

Andrew Whitacre, the cheerful communications manager for the Center for Future Civic Manager, posted Flip cam video from the "Ten Ways to Fail" barcamp led by Rick Borovoy, a visiting scientist at the Media Lab and CFCM. In it, Jay Rosen, the NYU journalism professor and media critic told how he raised the flag for citizen journalism 20 years ago against an industry that wanted to hear nothing of it. His thesis was that the more people participating in news gathering, the stronger that press system would be. "We were met with tremendous resistance and ridicule for many years," said Rosen. "I didn't care because it was true." He kept pushing the idea, writing a book and raising the topic at innumerable conferences. Then the web came along and Rosen's vision became a reality.

That "10 Ways to Fail" barcamp was later chosen by plebiscite as one of the three best barcamps, along with Chrys Wu's "Creating and Maintaining Online Communities" and Christina Xu and Leo Burd's "Kids These Days." Borovoy, Xu and other denizens of the Media Lab and CFCM got to display their work and works in progress at various points during the conference. Jeffrey Yoo Warren explained how he's helping Gulf Coast residents use balloons, kites and an inexpensive Canon PowerShot camera to take aerial

Chrys Wu

Not long ago collaboration was antithetical to the way news organizations did their business. Kyle Pope, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who is now editor in chief of the New York Observer, said, "I grew up thinking the way you succeeded in journalism is to tear the throat out of everyone else." Now he sees the futility of "spending millions to beat the other guy by two hours," and is "super psyched" about collaborating with journalism students for Observer investigative reporting projects.

Stearns asked the barcamp participants what reasons there are not to collaborate.

Some stories just aren't cut out for citizen journalists, said Cohn. "If you're investigating the Mafia, don't put it up on the (Spot.us) site." But he added that many other topics can only be done well with collaborations, such as weighing the impact of No Child Left Behind or examining water resources across the country.

Stalin K. of Video Volunteers in India voiced frustration with CNN International, which he said initially expressed interest in using some of his local citizen journalists' reports, then discarding them as not objective enough.

Colin Rhinesmith, the community media and technology manager for Cambridge Community Television (CCT), complained that the Globe had picked up something that originated on CCT and gave it no credit.

A young MIT staffer auditing the barcamp asked why CCT would care. "The Globe is getting ready to bite the dust. The Globe is going down," she said. But Cohn observed, "I don't know if it's constructive to point to an instance of old media bullying. Show me a schoolroom in America and I'll find you a bully." I asked if anyone agreed with the MIT staffer's assessment of the Globe's prospects; no one answered.

photographs of the BP oil spill. He followed up on Friday morning by photographing the MIT campus from 1,500 feet with a balloon launched from the balcony outside Building 15's Winter Garden.

The MIT crew produce lots of maps – maps of BP stations, maps of the occupied Palestinian territories, maps of where all the metals and other materials that go into a laptop come from. They have figured out how to track shipping lines in real time across the seven oceans. "I'm not sure if the pirates know this," said graduate student and supply logistics expert Matthew Heckenberry. Others showed off web sites to help consumers and activists stage boycotts or get people to pool personal financial data to solve community problems. Jenny 8. Lee, Adam Glenn and others would tweet links to their presentation slides even before the presenters finished speaking. Daniel Schultz (@slifty), who as a Carnegie Mellon undergraduate won a small News Challenge grant in 2007 to blog about community participation and is about to start graduate studies at the MIT Media Lab, summed up the effect of all this in a Tweet Thursday afternoon: "Man I love this conference, it gets so many gears spinning!"

Finally, at midday Friday bands of conference participants made brief pitches for three prizes of $3,000, $2,000 and $1,000 for the best collaboration ideas produced over the three days. A troika including three activists and media innovators from India – Stalin K., the India director for Jessica Mayberry's Video Volunteers, which trains poor villagers to become community journalists, Mayank Shivam, co-founder of Gram Vaani, which helps villages open low-cost radio stations, and Shu Choudhard, a Knight International Journalism Fellow with the International Center for Journalists, who is building a web site for tribal people in central India to file news reports with cell phones – carried off the top prize.

A Tweet from Christine Xu captured Stalin K.'s acceptance speech: "We are all from India...but it took meeting in America to collaborate. That's globalization for you."

Lisa Williams (@placeblogger), the founder and CEO of Placeblogger, the mother lode for local web blogs and a 2007 News Challenge winner, sent out the last real time Tweet: "@ibarguen has the final word: `generosity...is typical of the kind of community we're building.'"

And that's what it was like standing under the spray of the FNCM 3.0 fire hoses.

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