Community and Place-Based Foundations and the Knight Community Information Challenge

John S. and James L.
Knight Foundation
Informed, engaged communities.

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REPORTS
FROM THE
FIELD

The Changing News and Information Landscape

The last two decades have brought fundamental and increasingly rapid change in the way information is created, published and disseminated. Communities have noticed a decline in the breadth, quality and relevance of traditional local news sources and investigative reporting. Commercial radio has almost entirely exited local news reporting and both printed daily newspaper readership and broadcast television news viewership have decreased dramatically. This massive media upheaval is endangering sources of information that have been essential to communities in a democracy.

At the same time, however, new models, tools and technologies are emerging at a staggering pace. Communities are experiencing the rise of new information sources, including online news sites from traditional news organizations and citizen journalists, as well as Twitter feeds from local political candidates and social networking websites for local PTA members. In general, citizens are increasingly involved in the co-creation of this information. These developments hold great promise, even if they are not yet fully understood or adopted in communities. The online public appears to be participating and engaging in new ways, with individuals moving from passive consumers of information to active contributors to information. In theory, at least, underserved communities can have a voice in ways previously unimagined. Perhaps best of all, the cost to create and publish information continues to drop. Yet news consumers in this new sea of information risk relying on sources that are neither credible nor comprehensive, and participation in online media is unevenly distributed, with marginalized populations continuing to lose out.

Amidst this sea-change scenario one thing is clear – the future community information landscape will critically impact the health and vitality of our communities.

This brief explores how, through the Knight Community Information Challenge, community and place-based foundations are incorporating community information needs into their work for the benefit both of their communities and their own strategies and missions.

Knight Community Information Challenge (KCIC)

THE KNIGHT COMMUNITY INFORMATION CHALLENGE:

Program goals:

Help communities become better informed and engaged about issues that are relevant and important to them

Increase engagement of place-based foundations in addressing community information needs locally

Total grantmaking (2008-2012):
$24M

Grants made in 2008:
# of grantees: 22
# of first-round applicants: 154

Grants made in 2009:
# of grantees: 24
# of first-round applicants: 141

Average grant size:
2008: $350K
2009: $186K

Range of asset size of place-based foundation grantees (2008):
$2M - $1,800M

Founded in 1950, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation seeks to build informed and engaged communities through a series of programs, including investing in media and journalism initiatives nationally and on a local level in the 26 communities where the Knight brothers once owned newspapers and beyond.

The Foundation has adopted the viewpoint that a community's information ecosystem includes not only news and information itself, but also access to that news and information and the ability to engage with it. Recognizing these different components and with an eye to the potential for community and place-based foundations to play an influential role in this evolving system, the Knight Foundation launched the Community Information Challenge (KCIC) in 2008 with two explicit goals:

1. Help communities become better informed and engaged about issues that are relevant and important to them

2. Increase the engagement of place-based foundations in addressing community information needs locally

The KCIC's grantmaking is just one component of a larger campaign to engage place-based foundations in addressing community information needs. Other components of Knight's campaign include:

> *Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy* – A convening of experts around the provocative idea of what will happen to U.S. democracy in the face of declining news and information resulting in the publication of the Commission's report, "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age" in 2009[1]

> *Media Learning Seminar* – An annual gathering of journalism and technology experts and foundation leaders that explores cutting-edge ideas in community information

> *Circuit Riders* – Consultants who provide technical and strategic support to KCIC grantees to assist with the design and launch of their community information projects

> *Evaluation and shared learning* – A partnership with FSG Social Impact Advisors to evaluate the KCIC and implement a shared learning plan to promote grantee learning

1 http://report.knightcomm.org

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How and Why Community and Place-Based Foundations Are Responding to Knight's Challenge

Community and place-based foundations themselves are in the midst of a transformation. Their historical role as fund managers or check writers primarily focused on local philanthropic assets is evolving; instead they are emerging as influential catalysts for social change.[2] Leading place-based foundations know and engage with different stakeholders involved in community issues of interest to them – nonprofits, governments, donors, and community leaders among others. They are taking ownership of issues in their community, mobilizing multifaceted campaigns for change, and creating actionable knowledge for the field.

Many community and place-based foundations are rising to Knight's challenge to engage in addressing the information needs of their communities. In 2009, Knight received applications from 141 foundations seeking challenge funds for their community information projects. KCIC applicants and winners[3] represent a broad cross-section of the place-based foundation field:

> **By asset size:** Large foundations such as **Foundation for the Carolinas** at $754 million in assets[4], and small foundations such as the **Manatee Community Foundation** at $16 million in assets[5]

> **By geographic service area:** Urban, big city foundations such as the **San Diego Foundation**, urban small- to mid-sized city foundations such as the **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo**, and rural county foundations such as the **Foundation for Greater South Wood County**

> **By foundation type:** Many community foundations and a number of private foundations with a place-based focus such as the **William Penn Foundation** in Philadelphia

2 For more information, see the Fall 2009 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* cover article, "Catalytic Philanthropy," by FSG cofounder Mark Kramer (www.fsg-impact.org/ideas/item/catalytic_philanthropy.html)

3 A detailed list of participating foundations and their projects can be found at the end of this document

4 Foundation for the Carolinas website (www.fftc.org) – About Us

5 Manatee Community Foundation website (www.manateecommunityfoundation.org) – About Us

Through their participation in the KCIC, many grantees are expanding their operational capabilities by learning about and deploying web 2.0 technologies such as Twitter and Facebook and new civic engagement methods such as citizen journalism. The projects are also leading to new ways foundations can differentiate themselves in a competitive landscape.

Perhaps more profoundly, KCIC grantees are learning how important this work is to fulfilling their mission of serving the needs of their community. As **Community Foundation of South Wood County** CEO Kelly Lucas observes,

"Effectively addressing information needs in your community is about more than just implementing a project. Making information available, accessible, and useful must become a core part of the way the foundation does its work. Successful programs will likely transform the work of the foundation itself."

As foundations continue to move past grantmaking to community leadership activities, such as convening and advocacy, they are recognizing that information and knowledge are common currencies running throughout these activities. As Michael Marsicano, CEO of the **Foundation for the Carolinas**, states,

"You cannot conduct meaningful civic leadership work without good information. Engaging citizens without data bears little fruit. Engaging citizens with poor data compromises all future community leadership activities."

The KCIC provides many community and place-based foundations with a simultaneous opportunity to build strategic capacity in information while also fulfilling a community need. The need for foundations to develop actionable knowledge and information runs through virtually any programmatic area that a foundation may focus on, providing a strategic lever with which all foundation efforts can benefit.

What We Have Learned So Far: Lessons from Knight Grantees

Community and place-based foundations funded through the Knight Community Information Challenge are addressing information needs in a variety of ways; they are incorporating information into their existing program, supporting information providers in their communities, and becoming information providers themselves.

› *Incorporating Information in their Existing Programs:* The **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo** created the GreenTable, an online information and advocacy resource, to help build the capacity of approximately 150 nonprofits in its Western New York Environmental Alliance.

› *Supporting Information Providers in their Communities:* The **Boston Foundation** has helped CommonWealth, a key policy thinktank, provide more locally relevant information online.

› *Becoming Information Providers Themselves:* Through the South Alabama Community Network, the **Community Foundation of South Alabama** has created an online information hub to store knowledge and connect people, information and ideas for an eight-county region.

PRIMARY APPROACH

	CATALYST FOR ENGAGEMENT	CITIZEN JOURNALISM	PROFESSIONAL NEWS ONLINE	VIRTUAL LIBRARY	VIRTUAL TOWN SQUARE
Project Goal	Projects are aimed at generating action in the community	Projects are primarily designed to engage citizens as producers of community content	Projects primarily publish content by professional journalists online, with opportunities for citizens to comment or discuss	Projects are primarily designed to provide access to content produced by community organizations for other organizations and citizens	Projects are designed to share and generate current content from multiple sources, e.g., professionals and citizens, and facilitate discussion
Intended Impact	Citizens are aware of and engaged in community issues Citizens and organizations are changing behavior	Citizens are active participants in generating community information, giving voice to new perspectives	Citizens have access to quality, locally relevant news Citizens are informed about community issues	Citizens have access to locally relevant content	Citizens are connected to each other Citizens are active participants in sharing and generating community information
Example Grantee Projects	**Minnesota Community Foundation:** IdeaMN	**Grand Rapids Community Foundation:** The Rapidian	**Greater New Haven:** Valley Independent Sentinel	**Community Foundation Serving Richmond & Central Virginia:** ConnectNetwork	**Berks County Community Foundation:** Community Information Hub

Source: FSG Social Impact Advisors

After a year of funding, most KCIC projects are still in start-up mode. However, as illustrated below, grantees are addressing community information needs through a number of different approaches, each with different goals and impacts.

While it is too early for most grantees to measure outcomes and impacts, we expect to learn more about the progress projects are making toward their goals as results emerge. And despite the early stage nature of many KCIC-funded projects, we are learning a great deal from grantees about what resources and activities are critical to community and place-based foundations to manage their information projects successfully.

> **Foundations are committing significant financial resources to address information needs through and beyond KCIC.** As part of their matching requirement, participating foundations reported financial contributions totaling $1.8 million, of which approximately 78% came from unrestricted foundation funds, 19% from restricted funds, and 3% from donor advised funds, toward their KCIC projects in the first year.[6] In addition, grantees reported contributions totaling $3.4 million of their own resources toward direct support of other information projects in their communities, further evidence that foundations are incorporating information into their program strategies and adopting it as a core community need.

> **To be effective, foundations are building capacity to manage their projects.** In 2009, 17 of 21 grantees found that they needed to dedicate staff or add capacity to manage and support their projects. Grantees have acknowledged that time and expertise are critical to project success and have sought out additional capacity from experts in technology and media, as well as general administrative and management support. As the **Chicago Community Trust** reports, "We found we did not have the expertise in-house to figure out what to do with what we had learned, so we enlisted outside help with more media expertise than we possessed."

> **Foundations are increasingly engaging in multiple community leadership activities to increase the impact of their KCIC projects.** For instance, the **Park City Foundation** engaged a broad array of stakeholders in their "Save Our Snow" initiative and led a concerted effort to reduce residents' carbon footprint through numerous community convenings and town halls

6 Source: 2009 KCIC Year-end Grantee Survey

WE ARE LEARNING

to understand their information needs, a public relations campaign to build awareness, and participation in research to gather data and track the community's progress.

❯ Foundations are engaging in information initiatives in addition to their KCIC projects. The **Boston Foundation**, for example, is leading multiple activities to address information needs in the community. In addition to funding MassInc.'s CommonWealth program, the foundation commissions research on important issues affecting the community, disseminates it through a regular calendar of public forums, actively solicits media attention to these topics, convenes task forces and other activities to recommend and seek change, and advocates for public policy and legislative change. In addition, their funding of the Boston Indicators Project provides data and reports on social issues to the community.

❯ Foundations are attracting considerable outside support from funders and sponsors. In the past year, KCIC grantees received funding from prominent local and national funders, including the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; corporate sponsors, such as JP Morgan Chase; and federal programs, such as the Corporation for National Service (VISTA/Americorps).

More than 76 entities have contributed to the first 22 KCIC projects.

For projects to successfully get off the ground or be sustainable in the long-term, this kind of broad-based support increases the odds of success.

❯ Foundations are also aligning the necessary partnerships and expertise to address their own capacity gaps – whether they are managing their KCIC project in-house, or supporting work primarily led by a local anchor institution, such as a nonprofit or university. These anchor institutions, as well as media and technology experts, are proving to be particularly important partners for many grantees. As the **Grand Rapids Community Foundation**'s Roberta King describes,

"As we brought additional community partners and individual citizens into the project, we more fully understood the full effect of the changing media landscape on our community and the need for new platforms for information exchange."

FOUNDATION-LED PROJECTS: Foundations are leading efforts with nonprofit or university partners	PARTNER-LED PROJECTS: Nonprofits or universities are leading efforts with foundation support

1. Central Carolina
2. Chicago Community Trust
3. Coral Gables
4. Foundation for Carolinas
5. Greater Buffalo
6. Manatee
7. Minnesota
8. Palm Beach
9. Park City
10. Richmond
11. San Antonio
12. South Alabama
13. South Wood
	1. Berks County TV – Berks County
	2. Colorado University - Boulder – Boulder
	3. Grand Rapids Community Media Center –
	   Grand Rapids
	4. MASSinc – Boston
	5. MinnPost.com – Minneapolis
	6. Online Journalism Project (Valley Independent Sentinel) –
	   Greater New Haven
	7. The Notebook – William Penn
	8. University of Illinois – Marajen Stevick
	9. Regional Information Initiative – San Diego

❯ Through their project experience, foundations are learning more about other projects in their communities and the overall information ecosystem. **The Chicago Community Trust**, for example, discovered that numerous information projects were already emerging in the Chicago area, as Vice President of Programs Ngoan Le shares,

"In our community we found numerous for-profit and nonprofit efforts underway to try to fill the gap in community information – from a new news cooperative with a proposed annual budget of more than $2 million a year to a collaborative among Latino journalists to fill gaps in coverage about the Latino community and a community-based effort to increase investigative journalism focusing on government transparency."

In Texas, the **San Antonio Area Foundation** is collaborating with 16 information partners and local in-kind donors. Through an outreach campaign, SAAF is building broader awareness about its NOWCastSA project with many other local information projects, policymakers and nonprofits, as well as with national audiences.

❯ Although for most grantees it is still too early to see evidence that residents are changing their attitudes and behaviors, foundations are putting in place evaluation activities to collect data. Foundations are learning how to track their progress online and are interested in evaluating online/offline behavior using a variety of methods, including surveys, web analytics, interviews, social media and observation.

KCIC Grantee Challenges

Although early progress is promising, this work is not always easy, particularly as many place-based foundations are new to the information and news landscape. The biggest grantee design and implementation challenges included:

> **Making strategic adjustments:** One-third of KCIC grantees changed their project approach or strategy during their first year of funding.

While it may be impossible to plan for every contingency, place-based foundations tell us it is important to be open to change at the time of discovery and innovation, and to recognize that the media environment itself moves at a fast pace and dynamically.

As Marilyn Howard, Executive Director of the M**anatee Community Foundation** reports, "We needed to be open to change. We learned that our project changed as new ideas were brought to the table and limitations…became evident."

> **Learning from a needs assessment:** In **South Wood County**, Wisconsin, the foundation learned through their needs assessment survey that residents needed more than just access to locally relevant information. CEO Kelly Lucas says, "Although we knew there were going to be differences related to socioeconomic status and the use of and engagement with technology, we were not prepared for what we learned regarding the digital divide and associated digital literacy in our region."

> **Addressing financial sustainability:** For many innovative information projects, it may be difficult to identify the right business model. One participating foundation describes their own particular challenge engaging funders, "Our donor advisors are less oriented to … the emerging nonprofit business model for news; it takes time to educate [donor advisors] on the impact of the challenges facing traditional news sources today."

A Starting Point for Assessing Community Information Needs

HOW INFORMATION-HEALTHY IS YOUR COMMUNITY?[7]

A community is a healthy democratic community — it is an "informed community" — when:

> People have convenient access to both civic and life-enhancing information, without regard to income or social status.

> Journalism is abundant in many forms and accessible through many convenient platforms.

> Government is open and transparent.

> People have affordable high-speed Internet service wherever and whenever they want and need it.

> Digital and media literacy are widely taught in schools, public libraries and other community centers.

> Technological and civic expertise is shared across the generations.

> Local media—including print, broadcast, and online media—reflect the issues, events, experiences and ideas of the entire community.

> People have a deep understanding of the role of free speech and free press rights in maintaining a democratic community.

> Citizens are active in acquiring and sharing knowledge both within and across social networks.

> People can assess and track changes in the information health of their communities.

AN INFORMED COMMUNITY

7 From the Knight Commission report, "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age"

What's Next for KCIC

Although it is too early to tell whether grantees have ultimately been successful in building better informed and engaged communities, we are encouraged by the level of commitment and engagement offered by participating foundations and their partners to date. As grantees have learned more about community information needs, the Knight Foundation has also deepened its understanding about the unique role community and place-based foundations play in this space, including:

› The array of financial and non-financial resources that place-based foundations deploy in their communities

› Ways to most effectively partner and support place-based foundations to advance the cause of community information needs in the field

› The presence of national, local, corporate and government funders supporting community information projects and ideas on how investment in community information needs may spread

› The networks of stakeholders involved in local community information systems including nonprofits, governments, businesses, entrepreneurs and other anchor institutions

The Knight Foundation has recently announced the second set of KCIC winners including 24 grantees with an array of interesting new community information needs initiatives.[8] As the Foundation and FSG follow the progress of all of the KCIC-funded projects, programmatic and evaluation activities in 2010 will explore such topics as:

› How and to what extent individual projects are achieving intended outcomes and ultimately impacting the news and information ecosystem in their communities, e.g. what sections of the community are being reached, have the projects given greater voice to new perspectives or improved access to locally relevant content, have citizens become more involved in generating and sharing information and/or more engaged in community issues

› What models or activities are proving most effective for place-based foundations

› How community and place-based foundations and their partners are learning and adapting their strategies as they engage in addressing community information needs

8 See page 15 for a listing of all KCIC-funded projects.

Get Involved:
A Guide To Addressing
Information Needs in
Your Own Community

Foundation leaders can learn from the experiences of KCIC grantees. Below are a few thought starters to help you assess the opportunity to address information needs in your community.

1. Map your information ecosystem to determine what the information needs are in your community. Conduct a needs assessment to determine what's needed and what resources are already in place. Understand how residents access and engage with news and information; what barriers are preventing residents from gaining access and engaging; and what efforts are already underway to address these barriers.[9]

2. Identify ways that your foundation can address your community's information needs through the work that it's already doing. Build additional communications capacity into your grantmaking – Don't assume that current capacity is sufficient. Look for areas where addressing information needs can help further your strategy and pursue opportunities that align with your values and expertise.

3. Use your role as a community leader to improve the information ecosystem. Engage in non-grantmaking activities (e.g., convening, research, evaluation, advocacy, or mission investing) that can create leverage for your community information needs work. For example, learn more about how federal or state policies affect your community and offer public comment to help shape the discussion. Where necessary, consider building your staff's knowledge of, and capacity for, news and information technology.

4. Determine what outside resources are available that could help you address community information needs. Identify potential funding and implementation partners and determine when and how to secure their support to ensure the project has the right capabilities.

5. Review the project models that are emerging from the KCIC and determine if any of these might be compelling options to consider in your community. Reach out to KCIC circuit riders, program staff or grantees to discuss potential project synergies. Explore opportunities to support and scale innovative models that address different areas of need, e.g., quality of information, ability to access information, and ability to engage with the information.

9   For an example of one community's needs assessment, check out The New News, a special media report commissioned by the Chicago Community Trust, http://communitymediaworkshop.org/newnews/

KCIC-funded Projects

Projects are listed by grant year, then by project name, grantee name, and project URL,
if available. For more information, visit the Knight Community Information Challenge website,
www.informationneeds.org

ABOUT

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The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers once owned newspapers. Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote community engagement and lead to transformational change. The Knight Community Information Challenge is part of the foundation's Media Innovation Initiative, a $100-million plus effort to meet America's information needs. The Challenge is a $24-million contest that helps community and place-based foundations find creative ways to use new media and technology to keep residents informed and engaged.

FSG Social Impact Advisors is an international nonprofit consulting and research firm dedicated to accelerating progress on social issues by providing evaluation and strategic consulting services to nonprofits and philanthropic funders. Our work combines the analytical rigor and data-driven approach of world-class strategy firms with a deep understanding of the social sector. We have invested years of in-depth research into successful evaluation and strategy practices and built an outstanding staff of more than 60 fulltime employees across four offices in the US and Europe.

For more information

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