

Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy  
September 8, 2008  
Community Forum: “Meeting the Public’s Information Needs in Silicon Valley”  
Mountain View, California  
**SUMMARY**

Knight Commission Executive Director Peter Shane opened the forum, by explaining its purpose. The Commission has been striving for a kind of “50,000 foot” view of community information needs by conducting general research and inviting informed speakers on the overall topics of media, technology, local democracy, and community dynamics. In addition, however, the Commission hopes, through this and two other community forums, to get a more nuanced view of how public needs are or are not being served in particular locales. Given the huge diversity of American communities, it would be impossible to get a total picture of local communities information needs, but each of the forums the Commission has set up will give a different and more local, though admittedly partial, picture of community information analysis, dissemination and use. Mr. Shane expressed his hope that this discussion will not be confined to the media but will also look to libraries, governments, and other organizations involved in information production, dissemination and use.

The forum opened with a **Roundtable on Unmet Community Information Needs**. Its opening speaker, **Chava Bustamante** works for Strengthening Our Lives, which is dedicated to engaging Latinos in politics in California through education, outreach, and participation. Mr. Bustamante's question for the Commission was: how do we overcome being strangers to one another so that we can come together and strengthen our democracy? And how can the media help as overcome being strangers?

In regards to the media's role, Mr. Bustamante said the media could be more active in publishing information about programs and organizations that help people accomplish their dreams. It would not be a bad idea, he continued, for news outlets to highlight labor unions, chambers of commerce, organizations that can help people with business plans, and information about scholarship opportunities, training programs and education. For example, if he had known about the GED when he came to California from Mexico, he said, his life would have been different. The media can and should talk more about where we come from, about the values we share, that we all believe in hard work and sacrifice, and that we all share a common destiny (like it or not) because our lives are intertwined.

**Emmet Carson** is the CEO and President of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. He began his remarks by saying that he regards the democracy as the process by which we distribute our tax dollars and also, by extension, how we legislate values. If democracy is at the core of how we translate our values into community the norms, then the media provide the forum through which we get information about these core values. However, the big problem today, Mr. Carson continued, is that we have multiple faucets for information and that people choose the news that

is consistent with our already-formed points of view instead of getting the news that is relevant to the common values of the democracy.

He believes that one of the challenges that we've got to grapple with is how to create a common good, how to get common information, how to combine facts and validate these facts, and finally how to have conversations about these facts and create a common understanding through both personal communications and new technologies.

**Muhammed Chaudry** is the President and CEO of the Silicon Valley Education Foundation. He looks for ways to mobilize the Silicon Valley community to get beyond the most basic education initiatives. Mr. Chaudry commented that there are only four major networks covering six million people in the Bay Area and that the limited market of news media results in a lack of depth of information and connectedness on the local level. The question is how to use media channels to mobilize citizens to take action, how to use the media to disseminate information about education on a local level, and how to partner with the media, journalists and bloggers to translate information so that people understand these issues on a local level. For example, Mr. Chaudry's organization has created a Facebook page for teachers and students as well as websites, organized by interest (such as calculus or science), where teachers can share information with each other. He finds that his organization is transforming its role as a content provider in response to local newsroom cutbacks.

**Matt Hammer** is the Executive Director of People Acting Together (PACT). He's been working with grassroots organizations looking for ways for everyday people to contribute actively to democracy and has been focusing on the low-income parts of the valley. The challenge, he says, is how to get understandable information into the hands of people who don't have access to and knowledge of the information that is available.

The question of, "Who will tell the people?" is what, Mr. Hammer says, unfortunately, keeps him in business: many people are not comfortable with the written word and so his organization works on making facts and figures accessible to all people by creating easy-to-read graphs, translating public documents into Spanish and Vietnamese, and taking laptops to churches and other places where people gather to show people that information is available and where to access it. Unfortunately, state and local governments tend to look at PACT as a nuisance, if not an enemy and the cuts at San Jose Mercury News have made it difficult for the stories of local people to be told.

**Judy Nadler** is Senior Fellow in Government Ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. She works to help people understand what an ethical issue looks like and how to create a system so that people can make more ethical decisions. In this pursuit, she knows, firsthand, the importance of communicating with the public about decisions; not doing so costs cities, not only money, but city confidence.

The Sunshine Reform Task Force is an example of increased government transparency (mayors,

council members and key staff have calendars online, for example); however, such transparency does not, unfortunately, translate to school boards and other institutions. Also, there need to be places where people can gather and get informed. Public libraries are a great example of this and are becoming community centers for people to meet and get information about their communities.

Regarding the role of the media, Ms. Nadler remarked that there needs to be more local news about things that matter to the community and not just the things that people like to read about. There is a big void in understanding civics and it would be great, Ms. Nadler concludes, if reporters and editors had a better understanding of the workings of government in order to better serve the public (for example, bond measures and the budget).

**Kim Welsh** is the Chief Strategist for the City of San Jose. She identifies the following challenges for the information needs facing San Jose: (1) getting people to care about their local community, (2) getting over seeing ourselves as global citizens who see our successes as independent from a local place, (3) giving more credibility to non-mainstream sources of information, and (4) engaging the under-35 year olds, to promote their greater civic engagement through the internet and other new technologies.

Ms. Welsh also identified three areas in which San Jose is doing well: (1) it has the business of the local government on the web and has made transparent the business of the city; (2) the city has cultivated neighborhood networks that can be used to articulate priorities to city hall and to create constructive dialogue about what the government and communities are doing together, and (3) local libraries have become huge community centers and information centers.

Following the panelists' prepared remarks, Mr. Shane asked Ms. Welsh what they are doing specifically to create community networks. Ms. Welsh responded that the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative was started about 8 years ago and turned the relation between city hall and local neighborhoods on its head so that instead of the bureaucrats making decisions about the services that neighborhoods need, the citizens themselves identify their needs. Local communities came up with a list of needs and in the process, some strong communication networks and local leaders emerged which can be tapped into in the future.

Commissioner boyd asked about the tension between information "push" and information "pull" and commented that she heard a lot about "pull" technologies but was wondering about ways to engage those people who are not inclined to participate initially. Is there any innovation on the "push" front?

Ms. Nadler responded that the public libraries are perhaps the best example of information push innovations. People come to the library to get specific information, for specialized programs, or book clubs and end up being exposed to other opportunities for civic engagement. Mr. Hammer added that answers good strategies depend on both old and new technologies. His organization goes to where people already are (the church, the synagogue, and public schools) in order to foster more involvement and participation. There is a lot of potential for disseminating

information via cell phone, especially for people who don't have internet access.

Mr. Chaudhry remarked that they first push teachers into the community using incentives such as innovation grants. After that, they create communities of interest to get the teachers involved with each other and the community. But those teachers without internet access are very difficult to mobilize.

Ms. Welsh suggested that perhaps that perhaps we need to think, not about "push" and "pull" but about "push" and "pass forward" to create networks of people.

Mr. Bustamante added that the issue is not so much that people don't care, but that people don't have the time to think about civic issues when working two jobs, sometimes with long commuting times, or just working long hours. It is important to realize that once people begin to realize how their involvement can bring real and practical changes to their lives, that is when people start to care and take responsibility for their lives.

Commissioner Mooney asked about the role of information intermediaries and wondered if governments can be intermediaries as well as journalists, media, and community organizations. He mentioned that he has come to the conclusion that information is necessary though not sufficient and that if we're talking about civic engagement, we need to have some sort of intermediary that makes the information meaningful and that enables people to use the information for civic purposes.

Mr. Carson responded that, yes, we need intermediaries, but he asks, to what end? We need intermediaries that create collective will about what is good for all of us and not intermediaries that merely give us information to be able to make a good decision based on my discrete, individual needs. We need to build substantial time to engage; getting one fact and "getting something done" is not the way to engage and build community.

Commissioner Powell then asked about the tension between the desire for an information system that has a centrality to it (with the attendant limitations of capacity and scarcity) and the desire for greater depth and complexity (focusing on niche and diversity which are often inadequately served by the mainstream media). He mentioned that it seems we usually talk in a binary way instead of in a way that integrates these in a useful and harmonious way.

Questions from the audience included a comment from a representative of Generation Engage who mentioned her concerns regarding the limited attention span of today's youth. Another audience member suggested that an important intermediary option might be organizations that teach entrepreneurial skills to immigrants and low-income citizens, who then use those skills to serve their local communities. Douglass Carmichael from Stanford University then suggested that the county is dealing with 200 small issues and almost no big issues. Instead of talking about potholes and sewage systems, why aren't we talking about who owns the water? The community has difficulty, he concluded, going from the information level to the new ideas level.

Mr. Hammer responded that a lot of work has to be done in translating information into a form that people are able to understand. Furthermore, not enough thought is put into thinking about how to get parents involved in big issues and how to get nonexperts involved with budget. It takes a couple hours, at least, of conversation explaining these big issues to people. Mr. Chaudry added that we need to think about where people can have these big conversations, and Ms. Walesh concluded that we need to get better at framing what the big, strategic issues are so that people can get involved on this level.

Mr. Shane then asked two questions: first of all, are the residents of Silicon Valley all walking around with a common, accurate image of their communities (images partially constructed by the media) and second, who do people trust to frame these big, strategic questions? Mr. Carson responded that people are absolutely not walking around with the same image of communities in their heads and that in terms of "who's framing the big questions?" it is a free for all: the media, tabloids, blogs, gossip, and government are all answering this question in competing and manipulative ways.

In another question from the audience, Luther Jackson, who works for the San Jose Newspaper Guild, asked about the role of communities in developing a better business model for newspapers and local coverage. Mr. Carson responded that the question communities are facing is how to make the news a public good. We've become addicted to free information, he concludes, and we need to figure out to charge for things that are addictive.

However, Commissioner Powell asked, is it viable for the community to share the burden of cost and furthermore, isn't there a First Amendment issue when the government ends up funding information sources? In a lot of the world, Commissioner Powell continues, there isn't the same fidelity to the First Amendment and to protecting the divide between government and speech that we have in America. This is another part of the problem in funding and community subsidies for news organizations.

The second roundtable of the day focused on **the role of media in Silicon Valley**. **Jim Bettinger** is the Director of John S. Knight Fellowships for Professional Journalism at Stanford University. He outlined a paradox facing communities today: while the explosion of information has made it possible to be better informed, it has also made it more difficult to understand many issues. One local cause of this paradox is the decline of staff reporters and editors at the San Jose Mercury News which had a 400 member staff in 2001 and only a 150 member staff in 2008. Another cause is that new information technologies, while exploding the dominant model of legacy news, are not yet reaching a critical mass of the community, thereby leaving much of the public uninformed. While, previously, getting the news was the culmination of the process of informing oneself, today, it is the beginning of that process and news organizations must be involved in gathering, synthesizing, evaluating, and distributing information.

**Linjun Fan**, a graduate student at UC Berkeley's School of Journalism, as well as creator of the

blog, Albany Today, told a different story about the power of new information technologies to better inform the public. Ms. Fan made clear that she writes stories for the blog according to the standards learned at journalism school and that, compared with local newspapers (which Albany lacks), the blog is richer in content and is driven by the requests of community members. One of the biggest problems is keeping the blog updated, but Ms. Fan is optimistic about the business model potential for local blogs, especially with local advertisers.

**Raj Jayadev**, founder of Silicon Valley De-Bug, emphasized the importance of ethnic media, not merely as a Spanish or Vietnamese version of the mainstream edition, but as covering ethnic interests that are not covered in mainstream media. Merely receiving information is not enough; one must become a communicator in order to ensure inclusion. A consequence of not being included in the news world is to abandon it and create a world of one's own. In the Valley, especially for marginalized youth communities and various, overlapping communities of interest and identity, media have become essential mobilizing and organizing tools towards more inclusion and civic engagement.

**Linda O'Bryon** is the Chief Content Officer of Northern California Public Broadcasting, including KQED Public Television and Radio. She suggests that, while the innovations of Silicon Valley garner international attention, local stories need to be addressed in a way that incorporates those stories in a larger context and that fosters civic engagement. Furthermore, the media's role must be as much convener and curator of information as a producer, and diverse voices need to be heard, not only online, but in the mainstream media as well.

**George Sampson**, News and Program Director of KLIV Radio Station, remarked that both new and old media are not doing as much as they could and that, with this shifting of the marketplace, there needs to be a concurrent re-ordering in how news media thinks about serving the public's information needs. For example, KLIV is starting to act more as a media company than a radio station. And finally, he emphasized, no matter what kind of media company you are, if you want to win the support of the community, you don't start by selling that community out; you start by providing them with the services they need, one of which is local news.

**Dave Satterfield** is the Managing Editor of the San Jose Mercury News and said that, for the news consumer, it is the best of times, but for the managing editor of a metro newspaper, it is the worst of times. Seeing a decline in the number of professional journalists and the ability to cover court cases, council meetings, and other local stories, Mr. Satterfield concluded that it is a bad time for democracy but a good time to be a corrupt cop, a corrupt government or a corrupt organization because there is less accountability.

Commissioner boyd remarked that, in the beginning, newspapers gave us information, not just about the community, but about how to be a citizen. Today, she continued, we aren't thinking about media literacy, about how a story is produced, about how to understand and critique news stories, and she doesn't see civic literacy as something that is being adequately addressed. Mr. Satterfield responded that it is very difficult to get people to care about an issue, but once they

do care, people become engaged. Mr. Jayadev interjected that the media are merely tools to enter into the democratic space, and the reason his company started becoming involved with media was a necessity for making a leap into communities that require deeper civic engagement. He remarked that traditional forms of civic engagement were just not allowing people, especially young people, to be fully engaged but found that civic uses of media were extremely effective in mobilizing youth.

Mr. Shane asked about the potential for information partnerships, to which there was mixed response. Ms. Fan made clear that she does not see herself as a civic journalist or an activist, but rather as a journalist that provides fair, fact-based reporting and that, as such, she responds to requests from the community for follow-ups but does not take part in their civic conversations. Mr. Sampson was also clear in his independence from the civic agenda, saying that, it's great when a nonprofit or a foundation benefits from a story they run, but that's not the point. He continued to say that he thinks the public is better served by media outlets working independently of each other and offering more diverse viewpoints and stories. Ms. O'Bryon, by contrast, said that she is a big believer in collaboration for certain projects and certain stories, but does see a need to maintain individual identities, even in partnerships. The question of foundation support for journalism also arose but Mr. Bettinger concluded that non-profit models for sustaining journalism help for a while but are perhaps not sustainable over the long haul (for example, the Center for Investigative Journalism and ProPublica).

Commissioner Mooney asked of Mr. Bettinger in particular, for what jobs exactly journalism schools are currently providing training. Mr. Bettinger replied that J-schools focus on the ability to find information, assess it, evaluate it, and write about it for a variety of media platforms. The core values, he contends, remain the same.

Commissioner Powell wondered if notions of wisdom, reflection and repose, which are derived from a sustained engagement with information--for example a long news story--are being lost. He asked if a society loses anything if a newspaper dies. Commissioner boyd responds that she thinks the linking structure of the internet allows for sustained and in-depth interaction with information online and warns against valorizing a golden age of reflection with news that may not have existed. boyd suggested supplying structures that encourage engagement via a pattern of links, for example, wiki links on news sites. Mr. Jayadev agreed and remarked that he's never seen young people more informed than today. The internet, he continued, is like a gateway drug: it's not that young people only have eyes for the screen; instead, young people are really engaging with information on the internet and via text messaging. Mr. Sampson is less convinced, and remarked that it is one thing to disseminate media and another to have an audience for it; for an in-depth story, he continues, he still turns to the newspaper.

Responding to a question about business models for the internet, Mr. Sampson said that there are opportunities for advertising, such as email and text blasting, but people are not yet capitalizing on this. He continued in response to another question about media literacy, that he agrees that news organizations are not doing nearly enough, partly because news organizations have never

before been faced with that demand. Ms. O'Bryon, by contrast, said that her organization is doing a great deal on the media literacy front, including a robust education platform with fourteen people out in the community teaching about available media tools, and working with many other levels of community engagement—workshops, teachers' guides, social media, online content creation, two-way engagement, early learning literacy, etc. with a special focus on underserved communities. Mr. Jayadev also remarked that there are a lot of young people getting involved in producing news content and using media in ways that enable them to participate and get their voices heard. Unfortunately, however, at the same time young people are getting involved in media and new technologies, schools are cutting journalism programs and yearbooks. On a final note, Commissioner Mooney observed that one of the most fundamental dangers of new media is that we don't have the tools available to distinguish truth from untruth. Mr. Bettinger adds, however, that there is some degree to which new media have made old media more transparent.

The final segment of the day was devoted to a **Roundtable on Technology and Innovation**. **Richard Adler**, the lead-off speaker, is the President of People and Technology. He remarked that it is difficult to make predictions about the internet because it is so multifaceted and facile. One of the ways that the internet is being used for local community needs is by mapping local information, for example, the Opportunity Agenda in New York which maps hospital closings over income statistics, or the Network for Healthy California, which identifies the locations of supermarkets and food stores. The internet provides people with the tools to self-organize and to create their own communities.

**Mike McGuire**, the Vice President of Research for Gartner, said that the biggest challenge is connecting people with the glut of information that is available. Even though citizens as media consumers are more active, it's still hard to maintain context for understanding the information they receive. He recommends using social networking, tagging, links, and other search, discovery and recommendation technologies as ways to connect people to information in their local communities. People value the news product, he concludes; so why are we whacking the reporters and editors? Why aren't we whacking the business side?

**Chris O'Brien**, Project Manager for NextNewsroom and Reporter for San Jose Mercury News, said that he has been spending a lot of time in traditional newsrooms and is struck by how homogenous all the newsrooms are from community to community. Figuring out the relationship of the newsroom to the particular community is both a terribly frightening and exciting prospect, but, Mr. O'Brien maintains, different kinds of newsrooms in a community are important for democracy.

He went on to say that the way people are accessing information has changed, with almost everyone using Google and search technologies, but also social networking, on demand publishing, printcasting and tagging as well. Interestingly, when he asks how people get their information, after Google, they answer, "other people." So the question, then, is how can media organizations become hubs for people to connect and facilitate conversation and to build networks for people to trust and to get information from each other online. Newsrooms need to

be able to publish across all media platforms, and collaboration is essential. The community itself, he concludes, is platform agnostic and it has to be the center source of innovation for the newsroom of the future.

**Amra Tareen** is founder of AllVoices.com whose aim is to make local news global. Using a cell phone or a computer, citizens can send AllVoices.com a short paragraph which the system then checks for relevance, categorizes, and publishes. The site is based on user-reporting, the system checks for content to create searches by area and by topic, and the system then ranks the stories by how many people are reading the story, commenting on it, blogging on it, etc. The idea, Ms Tareen concluded, is to create a community of like-minded people who you are automatically connected and to weave all types of media together to provide a context for user-generated information.

**Holmes Wilson** is the Co-Founder of the Participatory Culture Foundation which makes a product called Miro, an open-source way to watch videos online. All the products of this non-profit are open-source and aim to create an open, public-interest space for video online. Participatory Culture Foundation is also building a network of local video sites, in partnership with local cable access channels, that would supplement a decline in local television news. One of the key reasons for media, Mr. Wilson continues, is to enable participation in government by bringing information and discussion of problems facing the community into a public forum. Media is about participation and the best media systems enable participation in the most universal way possible.

Mr. Wilson suggested that the information needs of Mountain View, CA are not that different from the needs of other communities. He continued to say that the ideal information community would be one in which every single means of communication was simply overflowing with competing perspectives and bringing out the largest array of possibilities. And while we do not have this, he observes, we do have the internet and this will bring opportunities for competing sources and multiple voices. The internet is giving us an ecosystem in which this ideal media system can come to life.

Commissioner boyd related a case study about what happened with Hurricane Gustav in order to show the potential of new information and communication technologies. In a complex system using Twitter, Craigslist, radio, blogs, wikis and on-the-ground initiatives, collective organization was happening by the minute, people were finding out about safe places to go, and CNN actually relied on Twitter for its own reporting. A blog quickly emerged to gather comments about what was going on with Twitter and local news organizations; a wiki was started in conjunction with online forums, and information was flowing up and down this complex chain of communication, from wiki to text blasts and back again via Twitter. So, Commissioner boyd concluded, yes, there are technological innovations going on but there are also innovations on the convergence of new media and all the different spaces in which to organize, mobilize, and disseminate information.

Mr. Shane asked how important is the current structure of the internet for the future of

innovation? Is net neutrality part of this innovation? Mr. McGuire responded that, absolutely, the infrastructure is crucial for innovation. Ms. Tareen suggests that the structure of the internet should not be any different, but people need to be better informed about how to navigate searches and how to make your information search-engine optimized.

Commissioner Mooney then asked Ms. Tareen to elaborate on mechanisms on verification and validation for the stories published on AllVoices.com; Commissioner Olson also asked about the legal responsibility regarding people who put out false or libelous information. Ms. Tareen responded that the information published belongs to those who post the information and not to the site itself. Mr. Wilson added that the law provides a safe harbor provision that requires ISPs only to take-down reactively any material violating copyright instead of proactively searching for such material. What's good about this type of approach, Mr. Holmes continues, is that it creates legal conditions under which legitimate online participation and user generated content can flourish, while leaving room for the law to target abuses.

Regarding verification, Ms. Tareen explained that it is through algorithms and aggregation that stories are validated as well as through systems of user-flagging. Also, regarding the business model for AllVoices.com, Ms. Tareen explained that it is based on ad revenue generated by geographic locale or topics and keywords.

Mr. O'Brien responded to the question about verification by citing the role of intermediaries, such as newstrust.org. However, he admits, with the wealth of civic and local information available, sometimes he yearns for someone to provide an overarching narrative to the facts. Mr. Adler also cited the amazing self-correcting power of Wikipedia as an example of a type of verification mechanism via community participation and engagement.

Comments from the audience included a question about how to filter large amounts of information and make it useful for communities and also how to manage all this information. Another comment expressed interest in how to ensure that new technologies are going to be useful in communities, especially for the lower and middle classes.

Commissioner boyd responded that a statement made earlier by Mr. Jayadev is extremely important: MySpace, SMS, and IM were already in use before the immigration protests; the infrastructure for spreading information and mobilizing large groups of people were already in place. However, while it's not the technology that's going to incite participation, the platform is going to enable participation to happen. The young people are creating this infrastructure and now we need to figure out how to put a spark under them. Ms. Tareen agrees and says that once the fire gets going, for example, the student protests in Pakistan, the tools are there.

The forum concluded with Mr. Shane thanking all contributors for their time and insight.