

Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy
September 9, 2008
Mountain View, California
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commissioners Present: boyd, Ibargüen (ex officio), Jealous, Junck, Lozano, Mayer (Co-Chair), Mooney, Olson (Co-Chair), Powell, Sagan

Staff Present: Durkee, Shane, Silliman

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy held its third meeting on September 9, 2008 at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California. The informational portion of the meeting was devoted to discussions of spectrum policy, presentations on a series of potentially democracy-enhancing information technologies, and research on information flow in geographically defined local communities.

In preparation for the meeting, Executive Director Shane had circulated a memorandum setting forth what he believed to be to a rough consensus position in the telecom community on a national policy to create uniform and affordable broadband access. Larry Alder, a Google product manager and member of Google's Alternative Access Team made a presentation on spectrum issues and Google's experience in deploying a free wi-fi network in Mountain View. Although no Commissioners dissented from the idea of supporting government initiative in furtherance of uniform and affordable broadband access, it was decided to postpone the formulation of a recommendation until the Commission's fact-finding had concluded and a policy recommendation could be considered in the context of a final Commission report.

Presentations on democracy-enhancing technologies were offered by Krishna Bharat, the creator of Google News; Adam Smith, Google's Print Product Manager, who discussed Google Books and Google Scholar; Lior Ron, who briefed the Commission on about Google Earth and Google Maps; and Jason Miller, who explained AdSense, a program that generates financial support for independent content producers online.

Following lunch, Mr. Shane introduced Sandra Ball-Rokeach, Professor and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, USC Annenberg School of Communication; Director, Communication Technology and Community Program; and Principal Investigator, Metamorphosis Project, to make a presentation to the Commission on Communities and Information Flow. Dean Ball-Rokeach explained the Metamorphosis Project, which investigates how information sources are transforming urban communities in the Los Angeles area. Years have research persuaded Ball-Rokeach and her team of a particular model for the essential communication infrastructure of any community, which they define as a complex storytelling network consisting of the communication flows among local residents, community organizations, and geo-ethnic media – that is, media that target particular ethnic or racial groups and/or a geographic area. Ball-Rokeach believes all communities are constructed through these storytelling networks with critical stories being told

about belonging, shared spaces, and shared experiences. Her research further indicates that civic engagement flows out of strong story-telling networks. To determine this, Ball-Rokeach looked at three basic components of civic engagement: 1) belonging (attachment and neighborly behaviors), 2) collective efficacy (the belief that the neighborhood can come together to solve neighborhood problems), and 3) civic participation (when citizens actually get involved with engaging community issues). She believes story-telling networks can be strengthened 1) through creating new multimedia venues for community organizations to tell their stories (about health, safety, community building, organizing, issues, events, etc.); 2) through disseminating these stories to traditional media venues (for example, geo-ethnic media outlets, especially radio, TV, and newspapers); and 3) through helping to establish media organizations that serve these areas to expand their local coverage so that key storytellers (i.e. those voices that the residents care about) can be heard by community organizations and by media. She concluded by emphasizing her research-based belief that efforts to strengthen the story-telling network will spawn civic engagement and that it is therefore essential in creating a democratic community.

Following discussions with the speakers, the Commissioners turned to consideration of a memorandum from the Executive Director seeking feedback on the basic assumptions underlying the Commission's evolving framework for understanding the relationships among information, community, and democracy. The memo argued that government transparency, public access to media tools, the existence of vibrant forums for the exchange of views, fact-based reporting, and media literacy were all critical to meeting community information needs. Commissioner Jealous recommended adding a sixth condition, namely, "media that create social connectedness."

Mr. Shane asked whether there is agreement that enterprise and verification-based fact-finding is identifiable as a distinct journalistic activity, and that there will be a social shortfall in the amount of such activity without some level of public support apart from payment for content via the free market. Commissioner Junck said she was not fully persuaded, and Commissioner Powell wanted to be sure the proposition was not misconstrued in a U.S. context as an argument in favor of government-run media. Commissioner Sagan said he was persuaded of the argument, and that there is significant risk that without some social policy initiative, a real shortfall in enterprise journalism will occur. Mr. Shane said the report could speak in terms of risk, if this were amenable to the Commissioners. Commissioner Powell further suggested that the report stick to a framework of needs to be met, not "problems" needing "solutions," which might more accurately reflect the Commission's mandate.

The Commission's next meeting will take place in Chicago on November 17. The informational portion will round out the Commission's fact-finding on information, democracy, and local communities, including a report on the three fact-finding forums taking place this fall. Half the meeting will be devoted to deliberations on the Commission's report and potential recommendations.