



## The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy

### DRAFT REPORT

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#### Introduction

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy was assembled in 2008. Its mission is to recommend policy reforms and other public initiatives to help American communities better meet their information needs. Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and organized by the Aspen Institute, the Commissioners were asked to focus on three large questions:

1. What are the information needs of communities in a democracy?
2. How well are those information needs being met in contemporary America?
3. What public initiatives might help ensure that community information needs will be better met in the future?

These questions are inherently daunting. They are now, however, even more critical. An economic earthquake has shaken the global economy to its core. The aftershocks are rattling families, institutions, communities and the nation, adding new urgency to information needs the Commission has identified.

To support its work, the Commission and its staff gathered research throughout the year and took testimony at four Commission meetings and three full-day forums around the United States. The Commission heard from more than 100 people, including community organizers, educators, journalists from old and new media, labor leaders, technology engineers and strategists, entrepreneurs, futurists, public officials, policy analysts, economic consultants and community foundation representatives. (Commission sessions were presented through webcasts and blog posts. Records of the Commission's year-long effort can be found at <http://www.knightcomm.org>. Members of the Commission staff also shared ideas and inquiries on a regular basis with over 150 knowledgeable academic experts and practitioners across a wide range of fields. Although the Commission did not have the capacity to conduct or sponsor empirical research, all of these efforts provided the Commission with a strong basis for informed deliberation.

Public testimony showed communities have vast information needs and that those needs are being met unequally, community by community. We cannot emphasize enough the diversity of our sprawling nation. Some populations have access to local news and other relevant information through daily newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, local

cable news channels, hyper-local websites, services that connect to police reports and other sources of local information, blogs, and mobile alerts. Others are woefully underserved. Nonetheless, the Commission has created what it hopes will prove to be a helpful framework for understanding the information needs of communities in a democracy.

The Commission believes that meeting the “information needs of communities in a democracy” requires systems for creating and sharing information that simultaneously enable individuals to lead their lives effectively and foster positive social outcomes for the community as a whole. Creating these systems means:

- Assuring that individuals have access to *quality information*;
- Strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information; and
- Promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.

The final Commission report will recommend actions to achieve these goals. The context in which the recommendations will be offered is one of both extraordinary opportunity and compelling urgency.

The economic crash of 2008 has been cataclysmic. It has shaken the nation at every level. Within a month of the market meltdown, the impact on metropolitan areas was devastating. Of 381 such areas recently evaluated, 302 were in deep economic distress. Sixty-four more were at risk. People’s need for news and information to help cope with the crisis could hardly be more profound.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the earthquake’s aftershocks could be even more significant, rattling some of the basic elements of democratic society. Democracy has helped secure America’s position of global leadership. Democracy expands economic and social opportunity at home. Local journalistic institutions have traditionally served democracy by promoting values of openness, accountability and public engagement. Before the recession, many newspapers were already struggling with falling subscriptions and advertising revenue. With the crash, others are struggling even more. Some observers worry that many newspapers may not recover or will emerge only as a shadow of their former selves.<sup>2</sup> Some local broadcast stations, dependent almost exclusively on advertising, are losing audiences and revenues.<sup>3</sup> There is plainly reason to be anxious about the consequences for local journalism, and therefore for local democratic governance.

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1 Richard Florida, *How the Crash Will Reshape America*, THE ATLANTIC, Mar. 2009, at \_\_, \_\_ (citing assessment by Moody’s Economy.com).

2 Paul Starr, *Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption)*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Mar. 4, 2009, at \_\_, available at <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=a4e2aafc-cc92-4e79-90d1-db3946a6d119>.

3 Project for Excellence in Journalism *Local TV News Reports a Drop in Revenue, Ratings*, JOURNALISM.ORG, Mar. 26, 2009, available at [http://www.journalism.org/commentary\\_backgrounder/local\\_tv\\_sees\\_drop\\_revenue\\_and\\_ratings](http://www.journalism.org/commentary_backgrounder/local_tv_sees_drop_revenue_and_ratings).

Still, the current moment marks a time of great possibility. Experiments in social communication abound. The advent of the Internet and the proliferation of mobile media are unleashing a torrent of innovation in the creation and distribution of information. Those who possess and know how to use sophisticated computing devices interact ever more seamlessly with a global information network both at home and in public. Wireless devices may well bring new services to the consumer at gigabit speeds within the next three-to-five years. Even now, cell phones are not only increasingly popular as a way to connect to the Internet, but they represent a chance for Americans who cannot afford or do not want the Internet to connect to the communication revolution.

It is also a moment of journalistic and political opportunity. Information organizations – including some traditional journalistic enterprises – are embracing new media in unique and powerful ways, developing new structures for information dissemination and access. Political leaders and many government agencies are staking out ambitious agendas for openness. The potential for using technology to create a more transparent and connected democracy has never seemed brighter.

### **What are the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy?**

**Community Functions Are Dependent on Information and Exchange.** American democracy is organized largely by geography. The Commission has focused its attention on the needs of geographically defined local communities. As collections of individuals, such communities need to accomplish at least four things that plainly depend on information.

- Communities have to *coordinate*. Activities like elections, emergency responses, and even community celebrations succeed only if everyone knows where to be at what time and playing what role. This requires a system of information and exchange.
- Communities have to *solve problems*. They have to identify their goals and challenges. They have to identify options for response. They have to estimate the consequences of alternative approaches. They have to weigh those consequences in light of community values. All of this requires information, interpretation, analysis, and debate.
- Communities have to establish systems of *public accountability*. Public officials in a democracy answer to voters for their performance in office. Voters cannot hold officials responsible unless they know who does what. They need information and analysis to assess how officials are doing their jobs.
- Finally, communities need to develop *a sense of connectedness*. They need to circulate ideas, symbols, facts and perspectives in a way that lets people know how they fit into a shared narrative. A community's system of meaning evolves as new voices and new experiences enter the information flow. People need

access to that information flow in order to avoid feelings of alienation and exclusion.

**Communal and Personal Needs Intersect.** Communities can achieve these four objectives only through the individuals who live there. This means that the information needs of any geographic community are inevitably connected to the personal information needs of its people.

To begin with, people have to be able to meet their own needs and the needs of their families in a way that leaves time and energy available for focusing on issues of the larger community. Then, for community processes to work, people require the information that relates directly to their participation in the public life of their communities.

Moreover, the streams of personal and civic information shape one another. In many cases, it may be news about the larger community that is most essential to helping people fulfill their personal objectives. Conversely, as people work on their individual goals, they begin to see the links between their personal lives and the public life of the communities in which they live. The civic and the personal are inescapably intertwined.

The emphasis on democracy in the Commission's inquiry reinforces this insight. Democracy means people govern themselves within the bounds of liberty and equality. In its American version, however, democracy means something more. It connotes a commitment to the freedom of the individual in daily life. It means opportunity to pursue one's personal goals and objectives, within the law, however one chooses. The information needs of the democratic citizen are both civic and personal.

In a perfect world, members of the public could measure their information needs and gauge their satisfaction in a reliable way. Community members could quantify the positive assets of their local information environments. Researchers could correlate information assets with positive social outcomes and determine their causal relationship. Citizens and their representatives could formulate recommendations to improve social outcomes by making measurable improvements in discrete aspects of information flow.

Information researchers have not yet developed the tools, however, to perform these tasks with precision. The Commission has viewed with interest international efforts at such indexing.<sup>4</sup> It has looked at efforts to create tools that would be useful on a more local

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4 These include INSEAD's Global Networked Readiness Index, available at <http://www.insead.edu/v1/gitr/wef/main/analysis/showcountrydetails.cfm>; the Media Sustainability Index created by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), see <http://www.irex.org/msi/>, and the Access to Knowledge Index being created by Yale Law School's Information Society Project, see Lea Bishop Shaver, *Defining and Measuring A2K: A Blueprint for an Index of Access to Knowledge*, 4 I/S: A JOURNAL OF LAW AND POLICY FOR THE INFORMATION SOCIETY 235 (2008). UNESCO's Press Freedom and Development survey of 194 countries is beginning to find suggestive links between a free press and other measurable aspects of social welfare. MARINA GUSEVA, ET AL., PRESS FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT, POVERTY, GOVERNANCE AND PEACE (UNESCO 2008), available at

basis to assess the quality of a community's information environment.<sup>5</sup> Such efforts do not yet enable us, however, to completely index success.

Still, it is easy to describe what failure looks like. Consider first the individual perspective. Failure is the inability to apply for jobs online. Failure is the inability to get relevant health information. Failure is the inability to take advantage of online education opportunities, or to use online tools to track the education of one's children.

Millions of Americans enjoy personal successes in meeting their information needs through broadband service and home computers or web-enabled cell phones. They have access at their desks – or even walking around their neighborhoods – to more information than many nations hold in all the books in their national libraries. They can pull together into a convenient web page all the threads of news they want to follow. They can apply online for a job, a loan, or college admission. They can check their children's school lunch options and keep track of their children's homework assignments. Before they go to the doctor, they arm themselves with ideas and information they have downloaded from health web sites or online support groups. They do not overdraw their bank accounts because they can check balances online and move funds from one account to another. They pay bills efficiently and without ever using a postage stamp.

Compared to such Americans, a person who cannot file an online job application, who cannot get a free and reliable first round of advice on his or her physical ailments, who has to write or telephone for education-related information and then wait for its arrival by conventional mail – this person is falling into second-class citizenship. This is true even if we put aside the actual civic activities that online connectedness makes possible. Millions of Americans lack the tools or the skills to match their information-rich

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<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001618/161825e.pdf>.

5 Researchers Mark Lloyd and Phil Napoli, for example, have proposed a local media diversity index that could be used to correlate elements of media diversity with local levels of both civic participation and civic knowledge. MARK LLOYD AND PHIL NAPOLI, LOCAL MEDIA DIVERSITY MATTERS: MEASURE MEDIA DIVERSITY ACCORDING TO DEMOCRATIC VALUES, NOT MARKET VALUES (Center for American Progress, 2007), available at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/01/pdf/media\\_diversity.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/01/pdf/media_diversity.pdf). At USC Annenberg, Professor Sandra Ball-Rokeach has developed the thesis that local communication infrastructure plays a critical role in three components of civic engagement: neighborhood belonging, collective efficacy, and civic participation. She has even developed a measure that she calls Integrated Connectedness to a Storytelling Network (ICSN), which she has determined – at least for the local communities she has studied – to be an effective summation of the relationships between what she calls local media connectedness, their scope of connections to community organizations, and the intensity of interpersonal neighborhood storytelling. Yong-Chan Kim & Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, *Civic Engagement From a Communication Infrastructure Perspective*, 16 COMMUNICATION THEORY 173 (2006). These projects, along with such community assessment efforts as the Sense of Community Index, D. W. McMillan & D. M. Chavis, *Sense of community: A definition and theory*, 14 AMERICAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY 6-23 (1986), the National Civic Health Index created by the National Council on Citizenship, available at <http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?tray=series&tid=top5&cid=97>, and Patchwork Nation, <http://www.csmonitor.com/patchworknation/>, point the way to the possibility of a deeper understanding over time between the precise elements of local information environments and other positive social outcomes.

contemporaries in pursuing personal goals. They simply cannot take full advantage of many of life's opportunities. The freedom they enjoy to shape their own lives and destiny is stunted. Even if they want to engage in the public affairs of their communities, the navigation of life's daily mundane requirements requires disproportionate time and energy. This is not democracy at work.

We can also describe failure at the community level. In terms of community coordination, failure looks like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. People know of dangers but do not organize in response to them. When emergencies strike, information systems break down. People do not know where to find food, shelter, health care, and basic safety.

In terms of community problem-solving, failure is problems proliferating unaddressed. Downtowns dry up. Pollution spreads. Unemployment climbs. Drop-out rates increase. Public health problems intensify.

A community without public accountability suffers from unresponsive government. Neglect is common, corruption all too plausible. Money is wasted as government officials are slow and awkward at doing what other governments do quickly and nimbly. Voter turnout is low, not because people are satisfied, but because people are resigned.

A community without a sense of connectedness is a group of people who know too little about one another. Social distrust abounds. Alienation is common. Everyone assumes that somebody else is getting "a better shake." The community loses out on the talents of people who lack either the opportunity or motivation to share their skills. When problems arise, there is little common ground from which to face them. People feel excluded, that they are not "part of the action."

**Engagement Requires Both Information and Information Intermediaries.** Part of what is missing in these sketches of failure – both individual failure and community failure – is information. But it is not just the lack of information that is the problem; it is an absence of engagement.

Information alone does not guarantee positive outcomes. Consider but one famous example. A front-page story in the June 8, 2004 *The Times-Picayune*<sup>6</sup> in New Orleans detailed a near-stoppage of the work that was then necessary to improve the city's system of hurricane levees in order to provide effective protection against a major tropical storm. The mere revelation of that information in itself did not mobilize the effort that might have spared the city the worst ravages of Hurricane Katrina 14 months later. Interested or influential people did not engage with the information at the right time and in an effective way. Unless people, armed with information, engage with their communities in a manner calculated to produce a positive effect, information by itself is powerless.

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6 Sheila Grissett, *Shifting federal budget erodes protection from levees; Because of cuts, hurricane risk grows*, THE TIMES PICAYUNE, June 4, 2004, at 1.

Information and engagement must work together to produce community success. Engagement marks a critical point where community and individual information needs intersect. What is needed to avoid failure is not just information. Communities need but policies, processes, and institutions that promote information flow and support people's constructive engagement with information and with each other.

Part of what makes a community information environment work is the ease with which community members can access more or less directly a lot of the information they need. Many communities are developing online systems in which a wide variety of public records are easily accessed. Information aggregators are experimenting with tools that can help people quickly locate the records and data available online that are relevant to their geographic venue. Among the more exciting developments is the movement towards making all kinds of publicly held data – not just conventional “records” – available online, so that both private and nonprofit entrepreneurs can use information that the government already has gathered as the basis for new businesses and civic projects.

Direct access to information, however, cannot be a complete solution to a community's economic needs. The fact is that *information is overwhelming*. People cannot be expected to amass the institutional resources from scratch that enable them to meet all their personal information objectives. Nor can any person, in his or her own head, generate all the analysis, debate, context, and interpretation necessary to turn raw information into useful knowledge. Thus, just as communities depend on their citizens for engagement, individuals depend on a variety of formal and informal institutions for support in engaging with information. Some support comes from private enterprise. Some comes from public and nonprofit institutions. Some comes informally from family, friends and acquaintances. But the key point is simple: engaging with information requires effective intermediaries.

**Journalism is a Critical Intermediating Practice.** News is a critical element of the information flow on which individuals and communities depend, and effective intermediaries are critical in the gathering and dissemination of news.

The 1947 Hutchins Commission Report on a Free and Responsible Press defined news as “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account[s] of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.” News can be decisive to individuals in their personal lives. Local, national and international events can point the way to important challenges and opportunities. News can affect decision making both mundane and essential to personal well-being -- where the Board of Education will locate a new school, whether plans are advancing for light rail through city neighborhoods, early reports of a possible meningitis outbreak at a local community college. The news also helps people to connect their private and public concerns. It helps us to identify and take advantage of opportunities to put issues of personal importance on the public agenda. To serve our individual purposes, we need continual access to news that is credible, verified, and up-to-date.

News is plainly essential also for the community as a whole. Community coordination cannot exist without shared news. The dissemination of information, debate, and analysis

is central to problem solving. The news connects communities by letting one neighborhood know what another neighborhood is doing, and how the affairs of some affect the fortunes of all.

There is also a connection between news and accountability. Paul Starr, Princeton University professor of sociology, communications and public affairs, has summarized some of the evidence: A 2003 international study showed a strong association between national levels of corruption and the "free circulation of daily newspapers per person." The same investigators found a similar relationship across American states. Government corruption declined in the United States between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Historians identify the development of an information-oriented press as a possible factor.<sup>7</sup>

A new Princeton study even suggests that, when news outlets close, people disengage more broadly from community affairs: The year after the *Cincinnati Post* closed, "fewer candidates ran for municipal office in the suburbs most reliant on the *Post*, incumbents became more likely to win re-election, and voter turnout fell."<sup>8</sup>

In any community, the intermediaries most systematically engaged in gathering, analyzing, and disseminating news are journalists. The connection between the potential positive effects of news and the vitality of professional journalism makes sense. Public accountability is an obvious case. Public officials are people. People behave better if they think they are being watched. But journalism that is good at watching people in power is hard. Its vitality requires training, resources, determination, and time.

The journalism of the future may or may not take the familiar form of newspapers. But there have to be skilled full-time practitioners who frame the hard questions and chase obscure leads and confidential sources. They must often translate technical matters into clear prose. Where professionals are on the job, the public watchdog is well fed. Part-time, episodic, or uncoordinated public vigilance cannot have the same impact.

Effective information intermediaries require resources. And, in this respect, the investment of resources to produce effective information intermediaries must take account of another critical fact: *Information is a public good*. The fact that communities need journalism does not mean that consumers will generate enough revenue to support the journalism that communities need. Except in specialized markets, subscriptions have never paid the cost of gathering and disseminating news. Local journalism of all kinds has been supported largely by advertising, which renders a significant service, but advertising support may well not exist for all kinds of information that a community finds valuable.

### **Private and Public Investment are Both Needed to Support Information**

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, note 2 *supra*, at \_\_\_\_.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido, *Do Newspapers Matter? Evidence from the Closure of The Cincinnati Post* (Woodrow Wilson School Discussion Papers in Economics, March 2009), available at <http://wws-roxen.princeton.edu/wwseconpapers/papers/dp236.pdf>.

**Intermediaries.** There are reasons of elementary economics why the private market for information cannot satisfy all of a community’s essential information needs. People underinvest in information because its content and impact are uncertain. People underinvest in information because some information makes life uncomfortable, revealing hard truths. People underinvest in information because they suspect that they can benefit, without paying, from the investments that other people make. (If others read newspapers and share what they are learning, why subscribe?) As a result of these basic facts, producers of information operating entirely in a free market will always underproduce because they can never recover the full value of what they produce through the market alone.

Because information is a public good, America has a long history of providing social support for the development and transmission of news and information. The Postal Service subsidized the delivery of newspapers. Congress created public radio and public television. States support schools and colleges, and local communities support libraries, as forms of social support for the generation and transmission of knowledge. Because information is a public good, communities need some public investments to support their information environments.

**In sum, the “information needs of communities in a democracy” entail systems for creating and sharing information that enable individuals to lead their lives effectively and foster positive social outcomes for the community as a whole.** The Commission believes government should frame public policy to maximize the potential for private market mechanisms to serve community information needs robustly. But communities also need to make public investments in the creation and distribution of information if they are to enjoy the kind of information environment that fosters individual and collective success.

What initiatives should communities pursue if they are simultaneously to serve both individual and social interests? How are we to take advantage of this moment of opportunity, taking full account of the immense social and economic challenges facing us? We believe the answer generally lies in pursuing three key objectives, which we discuss in the following sections of the Commission’s report:

- **Assuring that individuals have access to *quality information*.** Assuring *quality information* requires that communities increase transparency and ease of access to social data for everyone. It also calls for key intermediaries to discover, gather, compare, contextualize, and share information on behalf of individuals. The Commission seeks recommendations that would make more and higher quality information available to local communities. How can society strengthen the capacity of intermediaries to assist communities in using information effectively?
- **Strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information.** Attending to *capacity* means getting people access to the tools they need, but also developing their skills to use tools effectively. Communities need to consider multiple issues: How has technology has ruptured traditional information flows?

How has technology introduced powerful new forms of access? What does it take to empower individual citizens to be full and effective participants in the new world of information creation and dissemination? The Commission seeks recommendations that address the expansion of technological access, the more effective use of existing technologies, and education at all levels and in multiple settings that will enable people to be more effective producers and consumers of information.

- **Promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.** Promoting *engagement* means generating not only opportunities to engage, but motivation to engage. The Commission seeks recommendations for engaging young people more deeply in the lives of their communities and enabling communities to capitalize on the creativity and technological skills of the young. The Commission is also interested in recommendations to foster local community activism around access to information as a public need.

A persistent multiple focus is necessary not only to understand America's current information moment. It is equally needed to change it.