

From Journalism to Information:  
The Transformation of the Knight Foundation and News Innovation

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## ABSTRACT

Amid the digital disruption for journalism, the U.S.-based Knight Foundation has made a highly publicized effort to shape the nature of news innovation. This growing influence raises questions about what it's trying to accomplish, for mass communication and society. This qualitative case study shows how and why the Knight Foundation has sought to change journalism by renegotiating its boundaries. Namely, by downplaying its own historical emphasis on professionalism, the foundation has embraced openness to outside influence—e.g., the wisdom of the crowd, citizen participation, and a broader definition of “news.” These rhetorical adaptations have paralleled material changes in the foundation’s funding process, typified by the Knight News Challenge innovation contest. In recent times, the foundation has undergone a further evolution from “journalism” to “information.” By highlighting its boundary-spanning interest in promoting “information” for communities, the Knight Foundation has been able to expand its capital and influence as an agent of change among fields and funders beyond journalism.

From Journalism to Information:  
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“Thus we seek to bestir the people into an awareness of their own condition, provide inspiration for their thoughts and rouse them to pursue their true interests.”

—John S. Knight (1969)

### INTRODUCTION

In the early years of the 21st century, amid the disruption brought on by the digitization of information, few professions have been buffeted quite like U.S. journalism, which has seen its economic stability and social authority eroded (for an overview of the crisis, see Downie & Schudson, 2009; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Amid this change, however, the story of journalism professionalism, captured in an array of academic studies, has been one of relative *stasis*—of resistance or reluctance on the part of news institutions to change fundamental elements of their culture and praxis in the face of existential threats, and of an occupational ideology that remains “operationally closed” (Deuze, 2008, pp. 20-21; cf., Deuze, 2005). In general, changes in technologies and audiences have been “normalized” (Singer, 2005) to suit longstanding rituals and routines of newswork, and therefore to reinforce a professional sense of importance (Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010).

This study, however, is not another recounting of a profession under siege, nor of institutional journalism’s general disregard for innovation (see Lowrey, 2011). Rather, this is the story of how change *does* occur within professions, or at least how catalytic agents seek to make that change occur by attempting to shift the way professions think about and act upon their normative roles in society. This is a case study of how one U.S. nonprofit foundation with decades of close relations with the news industry, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has undertaken an ambitious effort to bring innovation to journalism. The foundation has done this in part by working to shift the emphasis from “journalism” to “information,” thus attempting to open up journalism—its definition, and the boundaries around its practice—to a wider set of fields, interests, and actors. The underlying tension in all of this is the struggle for journalism’s soul: how to reconcile the need for professional control

against the impulse for greater user participation. How that tension is navigated will affect the ultimate shape of the profession and its place in society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Digitization and Journalism**

In contemporary (news) media, the traditional paradigm of one-to-many broadcast flows directed by professionals has been complicated by the rise of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007) made possible by horizontal digital networks. This shift has been especially problematic for journalism in wired societies; even while news media retain a dominant role in setting the agenda for public discourse (McCombs, 2005), increasingly they must confront the vagaries of operating in a network that weakens distinctions between professional and amateur, producer and consumer (Singer, 2010a). This ongoing evolution works to undermine crucial elements of journalistic authority (Robinson, 2007), expertise (Anderson, 2008), and gatekeeping control over information (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009)—the latter of which, crucially, has endowed the press with professional prestige in society and monopolistic power in local advertising markets.

For much of the 20th century, both the business models and the news-making models of U.S. journalism were highly stable and successful enterprises because they took advantage of scarcity, exclusivity, and control. They dominated the means of media production, access to expert source material, and distribution to wide audiences. Digitization, however, has challenged each of those elements; in a world of ones and zeros, information is no longer scarce, hard to produce, nor difficult to repurpose and share. This development challenges journalists’ dual claims to material control and cultural authority in mediating public discourse. Under these conditions of digitization and dissolution of professional moorings, how does journalism—as an idea system of culture and values, as well as a practice seeking economic viability—reconstitute and reorient itself?

With that general problem as backdrop, this paper takes up a central tension for 21st century journalism, examining the unresolved interplay between professional control and open participation. I introduce two guiding concepts that help to codify the polarities on each side of this tension: the *professional logic* and *participatory logic* of media work. A “logic” is an organizing framework that embodies taken-for-granted assumptions about a particular

rationale or ideology—in this case, an encompassing sense for how one ought to work with and within the media under certain conditions and assumptions (c.f., Deuze, 2007, 2009b). On the one hand, the logic of professionalism implies a degree of *control*, rhetorically and materially, over a body of knowledge; on the other, participatory forms of media creation and circulation are unregulated, distributed, and therefore *outside the bounds of institutional control* by nature. Thus, in the context of journalism, a professional logic is one that seeks to retain control over content, in the normative role as society’s gatekeeping steward.

Alternatively, a participatory logic seeks to distribute that control over content to end-users, thus democratizing the process of media production and distribution through digital networks.

In the sociological study of journalism, this struggle for control has become an emerging area of focus, beginning with early studies of newspapers’ transition to the Web (e.g., Boczkowski, 2004). However, this professional–participatory polarity has become even more prominent in recent literature on blogging, citizen journalism, and other facets of the read-write, socially networked internet of today (for an overview, see Singer et al., 2011; for additional examples, see Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Bruns, 2008; Carlson, 2007; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, in press; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Singer, 2007, 2010b; Thurman, 2008). This strand of literature has highlighted the extent to which professional identity has been tested in the digital media environment. The rise of user-generated content, in particular, presents not only practical challenges to newswork but also philosophical questions about occupational values (Lewis et al., 2010; Singer, 2010a). As Singer and Ashman (2009) describe these questions: “If the content space is shared, is responsibility for the content itself also shared? Who decides what is credible, true, or even newsworthy in the first place? What happens to the prized journalistic norm of autonomy in this environment?” (p. 4)

But, for institutional journalism at large, digitization has brought more than challenges to authority and identity. An equally vexing challenge has come from the erosion of longstanding business models for news (Downie & Schudson, 2009; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). The troubles are particularly acute for U.S. metropolitan newspapers, which have seen spiraling losses in readership, revenue, and market value as their control over local advertising has unraveled, resulting in mass layoffs and diminished output (e.g., Compton & Benedetti, 2010; Franklin, 2008; Meyer, 2009; Singer, 2008). This weakened position contributes to a

downward spiral, as fewer resources contribute to poorer quality, which in turn leads to less penetration in the local market and less influence in shaping public discourse (Jones, 2009; Meyer, 2009).

### **The Influence of Nonprofits and the Knight Foundation**

Institutional journalism, therefore, faces twin crises of assembly (how should news be put together?) and subsidy (who will pay for it?). As legacy news organizations have seemed paralyzed in resolving both problems, nonprofit foundations have stepped forward to stimulate and underwrite innovation on a wide scale (for perspectives on this trend, see Browne, 2010; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Guensburg, 2008; Hamilton, 2009; Kurpius, Metzgar, & Rowley, 2010; Westphal, 2009; Wilhelm, 2009). Most prominent among these foundations is the Knight Foundation (Lewis, 2010). It has given more than \$400 million to journalism-related initiatives during its long and often close relationship with the profession, but more than half of those funds have been invested in the past decade alone. Moreover, in the five years since Alberto Ibarguen, a former newspaper publisher, was named president and CEO, a large portion of those funds have shifted from traditional journalism projects (e.g., endowing chairs in journalism schools, or underwriting mid-career training programs for professionals) to more experimental—and risky—initiatives intended to stimulate innovation in journalism (Wilhelm, 2009). Knight has invested millions in supporting news startups in California, Minnesota, Missouri, and Texas (to name just a few; for examples and details, see Kurpius et al., 2010), and underwritten a whole series of grants focused on citizen and collaborative forms of journalism (Connell, 2010)—in short, projects out of the mainstream mold.

The signature effort of this process, of the foundation's self-described “transformation,” has been the Knight News Challenge, a \$25 million contest that, from 2006 to 2011, sought to fund “innovative ideas that develop platforms, tools and services to inform and transform community news, conversations and information distribution” using digital media. For the Knight Foundation and philanthropies at large, the Knight News Challenge represented a key shift from traditional grant-making in that the contest is open to all: individuals as well as organizations, for-profit firms as well as non-profit institutions, and (crucially) non-journalists as well as professionals. Because of the openness of the contest, as

well as the wide media coverage and acclaim that its winners have generated, the Knight News Challenge assumed an outsized role in setting the agenda for news innovation as “the most high-profile competition in the future-of-news space” (Benton, 2010).

To recap, at a time of great disruption for journalism, and amid nonprofit foundations’ growing influence within the field, the Knight Foundation has emerged as the leading philanthropic stimulus (for evidence: see Downie & Schudson, 2009; Lewis, 2010; Osnos, 2010; Sokolove, 2009; Wilhelm, 2009). It directs much of the field’s experimentation as a funding source for news startups, an incubator of innovation, and a promoter of distinctly non-traditional ways of doing journalism. At the same time, however, it retains great influence at the core of the profession with its reliable support of journalism schools, associations, and mid-career training programs. This expanding footprint of investment and influence—at a time when journalism’s professional core has been contracting as legacy news institutions shrink—raises some questions of professional and scholarly concern: What is the Knight Foundation hoping to accomplish in all of this? How is it intending to transform the profession of journalism, and with what potential consequences for the future of the field and its innovation in the digital age? To date, no published scholarly research has attempted a systematic investigation of the foundation’s attempt to innovate journalism. This void is particularly silent on the question of professional and participatory logics of newswork: How is the Knight Foundation negotiating issues of professional control and open participation, and with what kind of impact for the professional field?

It matters, therefore, to understand how the Knight Foundation *talks about* journalism, attempts to *translate that articulation* in the way it underwrites news innovation, and altogether seeks to *shape journalism’s professional orientation* for the future. Thus, this case study considers how the Knight Foundation has negotiated journalism as boundary work (cf., Gieryn, 1983); this paper examines both the foundation’s rhetoric *and* structural activities, given that both elements (talk and action) constitute a jurisdictional claim about professional boundaries (Abbott, 1998). By focusing on these elements and their evolution over time, this study shows how and why the Knight Foundation has attempted to change itself and the journalism field at large.

## METHODS

To understand how the Knight Foundation has defined journalism and acted in relation to it, one must be grounded in the foundation's rhetoric and activities as a whole. Over the course of six months (December 2009 to May 2010), the researcher gathered and concurrently analyzed a body of material that was produced by or about the Knight Foundation's journalism, media innovation, and related initiatives. The resulting collection included more than a hundred "texts," in the broadest sense of the word, representing foundation reports, archival notes, news releases, speeches, news articles, interviews, blog posts, videos, podcasts, and more. Many of these were collected from the Knight Foundation's website ([knightfoundation.org](http://knightfoundation.org)), but, in total, the materials came from a wide variety of sources that were available across the internet. The materials were found through relevant keyword searches and the researcher's own immersion in the Knight Foundation's Web-based offerings. Among the most important of these texts were speeches, policy statements, and other pronouncements addressing why the foundation was pursuing an innovation-focused media strategy.

As a supplement to these texts, a series of interviews were conducted with current and former Knight Foundation staff. The most important of these were interviews with foundation leaders most closely directing journalism initiatives: Alberto Ibargüen, foundation president and CEO (interview conducted February 23, 2010); Eric Newton, then vice president for the journalism program and now senior adviser to the president (interviewed March 25, 2010); and Gary Keibel, then journalism program director and head of the Knight News Challenge, and now a dean at the University of Nebraska (interviewed February 24, 2010). These latter three interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the resulting texts analyzed among the others here. Overall, because Ibargüen speaks so frequently as the "face" of the foundation, his statements were overly represented among these materials and thus appear quite frequently in the analysis section to follow.

This broad sweep of evidence was qualitatively analyzed in search of key words, patterns, and themes that would call up a sense for how the Knight Foundation has articulated its approach to journalism, innovation, and information generally, and translated those ideals into actual practice and policy change. From this close reading, four interlocking (though not necessarily sequential) themes were found.



## RESULTS

### Overview of the Findings

First, in the years since Alberto Ibargüen assumed leadership in 2005, the Knight Foundation has broadened its conception of journalism, moving beyond a professionally focused definition to include (and even embrace) de-institutional and participatory forms of expression and expertise. In doing so, Knight has not “abandoned” its commitment to the professional core and its ideals, but rather has re-articulated the foundation’s norms in a way that make participation both a natural and necessary component of 21st century journalism.

Second, in broadening this definition, the foundation has downplayed the ideologically laden “journalism” in favor of the more neutral “information,” a term that more easily invites participation and open interpretation, and is associated with trusting distributed publics.

Third, these cultural and rhetorical efforts, significant for their de-institutional logic, have allowed the Knight Foundation to “decenter” itself and pursue structural changes in its philanthropy—opening the door to challenge contests and other projects that reflect a reformulation of journalism boundaries.

Fourth, and through all of this, the Knight Foundation has emerged as a boundary-spanning agent, expanding its influence within journalism and beyond. Through a common interest in “information,” the foundation has connected with other professional fields and nonprofit foundations, all in pursuit of a revised aim for journalism: one that focuses more on the *outcomes* of news (“informed and engaged communities”) than on any particular (professional) *means* of accomplishing them. These patterns will be explained in two sections: “From Professionalism to Participation,” and “From Journalism to Information.”

### From Professionalism to Participation

Since its founding in 1950, the Knight Foundation historically has been a *journalism* foundation. Even while private and financially independent from the Knight newspaper chain, it nevertheless was funded by the family’s newspaper fortune, long enjoyed a close relationship with the newspaper chains that bore the Knight name, and primarily was in the business of supporting the mainstream press—offering mid-career fellowships to its professionals, funding more than two dozen endowed chairs at journalism schools, and

pouring money into press freedom advocacy.<sup>1</sup> These efforts were highly valued within the field and gave the Knight name a prominent place in the professional culture, branded as a steward of journalism excellence (e.g., Cleghorn, 1996; Cunningham, 1999; Kunkel, 2006). In turn, Knight upheld a definitional standard that matched the press' own self-conception: of journalism as society's watchdog steward, holding a high and important calling to make powerful interests accountable.

### *A History of 'Journalism Excellence'*

To review the Knight Foundation's annual reports<sup>2</sup> around the turn of the millennium—beginning in 1999, the earliest point at which a report is available—is to find a thoroughly consistent reference to journalism and its centrality to the foundation: “Knight Foundation's basic mission remains unchanged. We are committed to *promoting excellence in journalism* worldwide and to investing in communities where Jack and Jim Knight owned newspapers” (Knight Foundation, 2000, p. 1). References to “journalism excellence” appear throughout Knight-produced materials during this era (1999-2004)—and, to a somewhat lesser extent, still do today. The foundation's 2003 report defined “journalism excellence” as “the accurate, fair, contextual pursuit of the truth ... on behalf of [the] whole community” (p. 16). The 2000 annual report provides some additional insight. It notes that, in the process of a thorough reassessment of the Knight Foundation's aims and grant-making, foundation advisors “were in agreement that we should focus on our two signature programs. We will continue to promote journalism of excellence by *supporting the education of current and future journalists* and by *defending a free press worldwide*” (p. 2). In this sense, journalistic excellence was pursued through a scaffolding strategy: building the right structural apparatus of training and autonomy to help the profession wield its full might in defense of truth and justice, at home and abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the foundation does not fund *only* journalism initiatives. From its earliest days, the Knight Foundation has distributed its funding among several priority categories, including Communities, Culture, and Education. In terms of overall grant outlays, only about a quarter of Knight's funding had gone to Journalism during the foundation's first 50 years, according to the 1999 annual report. Nevertheless, there is little question that Knight, as a brand, remains most powerful in the journalism field, where, the same report noted, it is “synonymous with excellence” (p. 21).

<sup>2</sup> Annual reports for 1999 through 2007 are available from [http://www.knightfoundation.org/about\\_knight/annual/](http://www.knightfoundation.org/about_knight/annual/).

Around this time, in the early 2000s, the Knight strategy for journalism education was reaching its zenith. The foundation was busy placing more than two dozen industry veterans in full-professor positions at the nation's leading college journalism programs, aiming to improve the quality of skills-based education—the industry's primary concern at the time, and a source of much tension with the academy (Reese, 1999; Reese & Cohen, 2000). In so doing, the foundation not only was aligning with the industry's approach to professionalization but also reinforcing a basic assumption of the time: that journalism and professional newswriters were one and the same—the former impossible without the latter. The endowed-chair strategy reflected Knight Foundation's abiding faith in the expertise and wisdom of industry professionals. This link between professionalism and journalism excellence was reinforced in the 1999 annual report; it noted somewhat obliquely that a Knight Fellow at Stanford that year had made a presentation suggesting that “the notion of journalist-as-professional is a relatively new phenomenon,” and that “[f]ifty years ago, there was much less disposition to *take ourselves or the business as solemnly as we do today.*” The foundation's rejoinder, however, immediately follows: “But as Larry Jinks points out in the accompanying reflection on Knight Foundation's support of midcareer journalism, *supporting professionalism, consistently and over time, is a proven way to ensure journalism of excellence*” (p. 36).

Thus, in the Knight Foundation worldview leading up to the early 2000s, journalism excellence was a function of professionalism. The premise of this stance is easily understood: Professionalization leads to consistency of standards, greater adherence to accepted codes of ethics, internal peer review, and so forth—all of which should promote higher-quality journalism. Moreover, this emphasis on professionalism was consistent with the times, during which the notion of participatory journalism was of little consideration. Nevertheless, while a professionalism-oriented journalism definition might have been quite reasonable under the circumstances, my point in emphasizing it here is to make a contrast: to hold it up against the foundation's more complex and de-professionalized articulation of journalism, news, and information that has emerged in the years since.

### *The Influence of Alberto Ibargiën*

Alberto Ibargiën, president and publisher of *The Miami Herald* and a longtime newspaper executive elsewhere, took over leadership of the Knight Foundation in July 2005.

The transition came during a turbulent time for the industry; despite a strong U.S. economy, cracks were starting to show in the business model that sustained newspapers, and cost-cutting measures and consolidations began to become more severe. In 2006, the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, then the second-largest newspaper company in the United States, was sold to McClatchy Co. With the sale, the Knight name left the newspaper scene. “For the first time in more than a century, there may not be a Knight newspaper in America,” the foundation’s 2005 annual report records. “That is sad news.” Concerns about the future of newspapers—and news generally—weighed heavily on Ibarguen during his early tenure at Knight. After some soul-searching and consultant-seeking, Ibarguen said he realized that neither he nor Knight nor any of the so-called experts had the answers.

[T]he more I thought about this, the more I thought, “Listen. The main thing you’ve got to remember in foundations is you’re not God and you’re not even the mayor, and you do not have anywhere near the resources to solve all the problems that you’re interested in. So don’t even try.” ... What I wanted to do was first of all acknowledge that *we didn’t know where we were going*. And that meant we had to pause our very, very active practice of teaching best practices. We had just done 20-odd chairs of journalism, in as many universities. We had become the most important funder of mid-career journalism education. Shame on the industry that didn’t fund it. We did. And so I said, “We’ve really got to pause. *We can’t teach best practices for a world we don’t know.*” (Ibarguen, personal communication)

Ibarguen’s move away from endowing journalism chairs marked the beginning of a key shift at Knight Foundation, one that has since transformed the nature of the foundation and its funding efforts. This shift engaged at least three major components, each reinforcing the others; these will be described below, followed by examples from the case material.

- First, Knight accepted that the problem for journalism in an era of digital disruption was the need to find new models through which journalism’s core functions and societal benefits could be achieved, in order to “meet the information needs of communities,” in the foundation’s common refrain. But the solution, however, was *not* saving newspapers as such.

- Second, Knight turned away from its longstanding reliance on *professional expertise*—both the news industry’s *and* its own—to acknowledge that the solutions may well come from the *aggregate expertise* of a participatory crowd of contributors. Typified by Knight’s abandonment of the endowed-chairs strategy, this reflected a shift from faith in the individual (professionals) to faith in the collective (“crowds of wisdom”). It also represented a

growing trust in actors outside the profession's core: from bloggers and activists engaged at the margins of journalism, from the "people formerly known as the audience,"<sup>3</sup> and from fields beyond journalism—from computer programmers, venture capitalists, community foundations, and a host of others who would bring solutions outside the scope of anything Knight might imagine. This was portrayed as participation both in the grant-funding process (as in the case of challenge contests), as well as in the actual work of informing their communities (as in the case of citizen/participatory journalism). Thus, trust in *participation*, and the *collective wisdom* wrought by such, become baseline assumptions of Knight's operations.

- Third, these connected assumptions—that neither Knight nor the news industry had the solutions to the "informed communities" problem, but that answers could come through participation from distributed crowds that were connected online—led Knight to conclude that it should *give up control* over some facets of its philanthropy, as it did with the challenge contests.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the foundation chose to give up control over maintaining journalism's professional boundaries of exclusion, of defining journalism excellence by the professionalization of the actor, by rhetorically opening the gates to greater participation from audiences.

We find these intersecting assumptions in a wide range of Knight Foundation texts since 2006, but especially in statements made by Ibarguen:

The *participatory nature* [of media] is only the beginning of it. It's the knowledge that the *information doesn't belong to me* that is difficult—and that it belongs to you.  
(quoted in Hirschman, 2009)

*It is incredibly liberating to admit you don't know the answer.* Then you don't have to go out and pretend and say, I am the foundation, I have an idea, and I have the money. Instead you can afford to say, "I have some money, here's the problem we're worried about, do you guys have any ideas?" (quoted in Wilhelm, 2009)

Professionals, by nature, seek to be autonomous from outside influence, and so an acknowledgment of one's lack of *expertise* or lack of *control* is a serious departure from the

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<sup>3</sup> Newton (2010) drew upon this phrase popularized by Rosen (2006).

<sup>4</sup> While the Knight Foundation has retained control over choosing the winners of its challenge contests, by virtue of this prize philanthropy model it nevertheless has opened up the proposal process to a wider set of ideas and potential applicants—beyond the familiar institutions that traditionally received Knight Foundation grants.

professional paradigm. Nevertheless, Iburgüen’s logic—of openness, of distributed control, of crowd wisdom and collective engagement—is more in tune with the digital media environment and its participatory culture. And, in this sense, his logic may reflect the Knight Foundation’s adaptation to the situation—its own way of “figuring out the flow” (Iburgüen’s words) and leveraging the momentum to accomplish its purposes. Part of this going-with-the-flow approach involves learning to roll with what Iburgüen (quoted in Stannard-Stockton, 2008) describes as the “chaos” and “wonderful strangeness” of mass participation enabled by digitization.

At a time of change and uncertainty, it is even more critical to focus on the core. So, the question we should ask, the question we ask at Knight Foundation, is not, how can we save newspapers, but rather, *how can we save journalism and communication*. . . . Nobody has all the answers. But I believe that the changes in how we communicate, and in how we define community, have opened opportunities for journalism . . . to *connect to people and engage them* in ways that will define our future. (Iburgüen, 2009a)

*Breaking Down Jurisdictional Exclusivity: Participation and ‘Their True Interests’*

In this sense, “saving journalism” becomes closely associated with making it more relevant to, reflective of, and engaged with the citizens it is intended to serve—all normative aims that grew out of the civic/public journalism movement of the 1990s, and then were transferred to the citizen/participatory journalism logic of the 2000s (Haas, 2007; Nip, 2006; Rosenberry & St. John III, 2010). Public journalism and participatory journalism share an interest in renegotiating the jurisdictional boundaries of professional journalism to allow for greater public input on what to cover and how to cover it—in effect, lowering the barrier between journalist and audience in a way that challenges professional autonomy (McDevitt, Gassaway, & Perez, 2002; Singer & Ashman, 2009). This is significant because Knight, among other nonprofit foundations, had a role in nurturing, in word and money, nascent forms of public journalism, as did Knight-Ridder newspapers (Rosenberry & St. John III, 2010). Hodding Carter III, who served as Knight Foundation president from 1998 until he retired in 2005 (and was replaced by Iburgüen), gave several speeches in support of public (or civic) journalism. In 1998, he said:

Civic journalism says that journalists need to rediscover the total community, listen to the total community, cover the total community and advocate for the total community.

It says that the people who live in a neighborhood *know as much, and probably more*, about what is wrong with it and what might be done to fix it than city officials and certified experts. (Carter III, 1998)

This early concern for the limits of professional expertise and the need for greater public engagement, evident in the late 1990s, would set the stage for the Knight Foundation's embrace of media participation in the latter 2000s. During Ibargüen's tenure, from 2006 onward, this became particularly apparent. Just as Knight legitimized the wisdom of the crowd by acknowledging its own (and the industry's) lack of expertise in disruptive times, the foundation likewise legitimized participatory journalism by suggesting that such could co-exist with and even complement the work of professionals. As Newton described it in a 2006 speech:

The new era has turned journalism upside down and inside out. Every element— who a journalist is, what a story is, which medium works best, *even how to describe the people formerly known as the audience*—every element is changing. *A journalist can be anyone. A story can be data, events, issues, ideas—or all of them. A medium can be words, sound, pictures—or all of them. An audience can become a journalist.* (Newton, 2008)

Even more frequently, Knight Foundation officials speak of media participation beyond journalism, eagerly endorsing the capacity for users to take part in the making and sharing of information on their terms. Testifying at a Senate hearing on journalism's future, Ibargüen said, "I enthusiastically welcome the *democratization of media* and am thrilled by its possibilities" (Ibargüen, 2009d).

We are living in a moment of extraordinary creativity. We will be a nation of *media users, not consumers*. We're going from the information model of one-to-many, of "I write/You read" to many-to-many, made possible by technology. (Ibargüen, 2009b)

More than a mere acknowledgment of changing patterns in communication, this conception of the active audience—articulated time and again by Ibargüen, especially—represents a foundational statement about Knight's assumptions and orientation. Toward the end of a 2009 speech in which he laid out the rationale for the foundation's emerging emphasis on media innovation, Ibargüen said, "What all of these [innovations] have in common is an assumption that *the era of 'I write, you read' is over.*" While such may ring

hollow as easy rhetoric—fashionable, even, at a time when social media is chic—one might argue that this invocation of “I write, you read” is significant for how it relates to the professional logic of journalism, or the occupational ideology of gatekeeping control described by Deuze (2005). In a widely cited piece, Deuze (2003) suggests that user participation online “undermine[s] the ‘we write, you read’ dogma of modern journalism” because it threatens the “core values and ideals” of autonomous control over the way audiences come to understand the world (p. 220). Thus, to contend that the “era of ‘I write, you read’ is over” is to contend that the ideology of journalism is over—or, at the very least, unalterably contested and perhaps transformed as control over content increasingly passes into the hands of end-users.

Thus, a norm of participation—that users *should* be enabled to engage, take control, and contribute to the news discourse—has developed in the foundation’s culture of and assumptions toward media innovation. While this norm can be linked historically to the foundation’s early interest in supporting civic/public journalism, more striking was the extent to which these references to citizen participation were historicized through the words of Jack Knight. In 1969, he set forth the “Philosophy of the Knight Newspapers,” concluding with this remark:

We seek to bestir the people into an awareness of their own condition, provide inspiration for their thoughts and rouse them to pursue their true interests.

In the years since, no phrase has appeared more frequently in Knight Foundation reports nor been invoked more regularly in Knight Foundation speeches. It serves as the foundation’s credo. Often it is referred to briefly as justification for supporting policies and initiatives that foster “their [own] true interests.” While in many cases this reference occurs rather generically, its usage has become particularly apparent in the way Knight Foundation (and Ibargüen especially) talks about its purposes for media experimentation and innovation.

We believe that the role of information is to *enable citizens to determine their own true interests*. We believe we’re living through a time of such enormous change that the most responsible thing we as a foundation can do is to experiment and learn, experiment more and learn more. (Ibargüen, 2009c)



By shaking up its own understanding of journalism—by allowing jurisdictional claims to open up and include a greater swath of participants and possibilities—the Knight Foundation is attempting to accomplish what the newspaper of late has failed to do: inspire people, give them critical information, and help them discover their own true interests. The emblem of this ambition is the Knight News Challenge.

*Knight News Challenge: Bringing It All Together*

In assessing its place in journalism, the Knight Foundation took a self-reflective step away from several of its traditional roles: of worrying about the “health of newspapers” (see Sokolove, 2009); of funding established (journalistic) institutions through a relatively closed process; and of “pretending” to have the answers from the get-go, in the typical top-down fashion of foundation funding. What emerged was the Knight Brothers 21st Century News Challenge, as it was originally called: a challenge contest that would *not* be solely concerned with saving newspapers, but instead would be an open call for applications from *individuals* as well as institutions (inside *and outside* of journalism), and would acknowledge, publicly, that the Knight Foundation needed help in identifying solutions to the growing problems for journalism. In May 2006—just less than a year after Ibargién’s arrival—the foundation first outlined some of its ideas for the News Challenge, and encouraged suggestions for how to distribute the \$25 million over 5 years. In this early iteration, the foundation said it was seeking “new ways for people to *communicate interactively* to understand one another” and “new ways for people to use information, news and journalism to *imagine their collective possibilities* as communities” (21st Century News Challenge, 2006). Indeed, in the first year of the contest, the proposal documents included a reminder to applicants about tailoring their projects with the words of Jack Knight in mind: “Thus we seek to bestir the people into an awareness of their own condition, provide inspiration for their thoughts and rouse them to pursue their true interests.” All of these serve to underscore an implicit emphasis on participation that was built into the contest from the start.

For the Knight Foundation, the News Challenge represented the first real leap into the innovation realm. It was the foundation’s initial foray into prize philanthropy, and so represented a loss of (some) control over refining the topic for proposals—even if Knight retained control over picking winners and losers. It meant erasing old boundaries about who

could be a grant recipient, moving beyond the usual suspects (i.e., other nonprofits or universities) to include virtually anyone with a good idea (Wilhelm, 2009). It meant “suspend[ing] our internal bureaucratic rules” and “pretend[ing] as long as we possibly could that there weren’t any rules at all” (Newton, quoted in Wilhelm, 2009). It meant trying to market the competition to the world in multiple languages. It was a request-for-proposals (RFP) “on steroids” (Kebbel, quoted in Wilhelm, 2009). Ibargüen described the uncertainty that this strategy entailed:

[The News Challenge] assumes that the *wisdom is out there*, not in our office, and seeks to find it. It also requires a certain level of comfort with *chaos*, since you don’t know when or if those great ideas are going to come in or in what form. Moreover, the contest is worldwide, so you truly don’t know where something might originate. (Ibargüen, 2007)

At another time, he said:

I give great credit to my [board of] trustees, who went from 0 to 60 in the space of a couple of trustee meetings, and after only, I guess, about four or five meetings with me, ended up agreeing to do the first of these [innovation projects], which was the News Challenge. And when one of them said, “Well, but what exactly will we be funding in this challenge?” [laughs] I said, as honestly as I could, “*I don’t know!*” (Ibargüen, personal communication)

While the News Challenge’s \$25 million budget is dwarfed by the roughly \$100 million that the foundation spent on journalism initiatives as a whole in the 2000s, the contest nevertheless appears to have become, both for the foundation and journalism observers, its most visible project—one that embodies a fusion of the foundation’s journalism roots and its innovation aspirations. Knight has walked an uneasy line in negotiating journalism’s *explicit* place in the News Challenge. The word “journalism,” clearly a part of the original framing of the competition, was dropped in favor of “news and information” for purposes of appealing to a broader set of potential grantees. And the nature of some of the grantees caught some in the profession—and Knight’s own board of trustees—a bit off guard. In the contest’s first year, MTV received a \$700,000 grant to equip young adults in all 50 states to cover the 2008 U.S. presidential election with cellphone-video news reports intended to reach teens and 20-somethings. Describing the project later, Ibargüen said, “Now some people will listen to this and *they’ll just vomit on the table*. They just won’t be able to stand the idea that you can

actually deliver serious news and substantive news and information in such a frivolous way. Well, that's too bad..." (quoted in Stannard-Stockton, 2008). Of the 51 News Challenge winners through 2009, a number of them involve games, databases, wikis, and an array of other projects that might not qualify for some people as "traditional journalism" (Kebbel, personal communication). The News Challenge thus represents the foundation's signature effort to upgrade journalism for the digital age—to meld the best of old-school ethics and ideals with the finest of new-age tools and tactics, all with a baseline assumption that media *should* be participatory (Lewis, 2010).

In a related study (Lewis, 2011b), this researcher conducted a quantitative secondary analysis using data from a content analysis of Knight News Challenge proposal documents (N = 4,929). The analysis was particularly concerned with the extent to which projects that emphasized media participation were more likely to advance to the finalist and winner stages in the 2008 and 2009 contest cycles (for which there were data). A logistic regression found a number of variables that predicted success, including (and not surprisingly) a series of variables that spoke to the News Challenge's baseline criteria: that projects be focused on digitally delivered information for local communities. But, even while there was no imperative that News Challenge applicants make user participation part of their projects, the regression showed that participatory elements like *crowdsourcing* and *user manipulation* were in fact strongly associated with being selected as a finalist or winner, all other things being equal. A follow-up qualitative textual analysis of 45 winning proposals (Lewis, 2011a) found that News Challenge winners believed that the work of professional journalists and the contributions of citizens could be mutually inclusive, reciprocal and beneficial in a networked media environment. Altogether, these findings underscore Knight's turn toward faith in the collective and its interest in promoting user participation in journalism as a normative goal.

Introducing the contest in 2006, Ibargüen said, "Our bigger hope—in fact, our plan—is that the values that defined the Knight brothers—values of integrity, fairness, community and verification journalism—will survive into our brave new world" (Ibargüen, 2006). Indeed, the Knight Foundation has not abandoned its longstanding commitment to "journalism excellence." Newton (2008) and others point to the continuing flow of grants to mid-career and online training programs for working professionals, journalism education initiatives for curriculum development, and the \$15 million recently staked to investigative

reporting by startup news organizations (Knight Foundation, 2009). What has changed, however, is the foundation's articulation of journalism: what it constitutes, how it is accomplished, and who gets to take part. Metaphorically speaking, the Knight Foundation has taken the tent of journalism, which used to accommodate a small professional class, and uprooted its stakes, stretching it to include a much wider set of actors (c.f., Cooper, 2008). This new tent for journalism is noisier and more chaotic, and yet the foundation revels in the dialogical participation. Rhetorically, this is the "journalism" Knight seems intent on building: one that is more inclusive, one that doesn't presume to have all the answers, and one that is more forward-looking than backward-leaning—in short, one that embodies the characteristics of the Knight News Challenge itself. This expansive progression, however, has undergone yet another important change in Knight's rhetoric and culture—a shift from "journalism" to "information."

### **From Journalism to Information**

It was September 18, 2007, and Alberto Ibarguen was preparing to deliver a plenary speech at the Council on Foundations' community foundation conference in San Francisco. It was the largest such annual gathering of its kind, bringing together representatives from hundreds of local, place-based nonprofits. Reading through his prepared remarks, Ibarguen found that he was "fairly bored" with his own material, and so when he stepped to the lecturn that afternoon, he decided to ad-lib a portion of the talk to cover what he really cared about: "information needs." Off the cuff, he invited everyone to visit Miami the following February for the first Media Learning Seminar, to discuss the changes of digital media, their impact on local news and information, and the role that community foundations could play in stimulating media creation. Several hundred of them came, and each year since the seminars have been focused on giving regional- and community-based foundations "new insights into the changing media landscape and emerging technologies while offering concrete examples of how foundations are helping to fill their community's information voids" (Media Learning Seminar, n.d.).

The story of the Media Learning Seminars is the story of the Knight Foundation's latest iteration—one that has seen the foundation increasingly move beyond its home in journalism to connect with fields and foundations beyond. *Knight has made a strategic shift*

*in rhetoric, from talking about “journalism” to emphasizing “information,” in an appeal to a broader set of professional fields, philanthropists, and foundations.*<sup>5</sup>

To begin with, and as explained previously, Knight has an overriding concern about the fate of quality information in democracy.

Media is all around us, yet communities are challenged to deliver news and information to defined geographic areas. . . . the Knight Foundation is interested in both the craft of journalism *and* the essential information needs of our communities. And we are keenly aware that as the craft is transformed by technological and market forces, *the need for reliable information in a democracy does not diminish.* (Ibargüen, 2007)

It was for this reason—to help fill the information void left by newspapers’ decline—that Knight introduced the News Challenge contest in 2006. “We were essentially trying to figure out how do you do what newspapers do for communities in a democracy, except instead of on paper do it digitally,” Ibargüen said. However, as the News Challenge contest developed, Knight staff began to wonder if they were unduly focused on the “means” of informed communities—on the troubled journalism craft—and instead should give more emphasis to understanding and promoting the “outcomes” of informed communities, with less regard to *how* those outcomes were achieved. As Ibargüen put it:

If you’re being agnostic about the form [i.e., digital delivery], shouldn’t you really *focus on the end result?* That is, stop trying to figure out how to fix current media and instead ask the question, “What does a community in a democracy need? What kind of information does it need in order to function well within a democracy? Where are we now, and what public policy can you support that will get us from where we are now to where we ought to be?” (personal communication)

#### *The Knight Commission and its Emphasis on ‘Information’*

This line of thinking, Ibargüen said, led to the formation of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, in 2008. The commission’s charge: “Rather than on *media*, the Knight Commission would focus on *communities* in the places where people lived and work,” with the task of (1) articulating the information needs of a community in a democracy; (2) describing the state of affairs in the United States; and (3)

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<sup>5</sup> This contrasts with the Freedom Forum, which didn’t mind “communication” in the academy as long as “journalism” was still given a distinct place (Charles Overby, personal communication, c. 1999).

proposing public policy directions as a result.<sup>6</sup> In October 2009, the Knight Commission produced a report (“Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age”) that it likened unto the work of great commissions past: Hutchins, Kerner, and Carnegie (cf., Newton, 2010). The Knight Commission’s major findings included three “fundamental objectives”: maximizing the availability of relevant and credible *information* to communities; strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information; and promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community (emphasis original). While journalism is noted in the full report, one observer was “struck by how little [the report] had to say about how professional journalists and mainstream news organizations fit into the future of civic media” (Gahran, 2010). In effect, the report suggests that Knight (both the Commission and the Foundation) has a broader articulation of the *means* by which to gather, filter and share credible information, and that those means may not always include journalists in the traditional sense.

### *Speaking the Language of ‘Information’*

Contemporaneous to the Knight Commission, the foundation developed the Knight Community Information Challenge. A five-year, \$24 million contest, it is an almost mirror-image of the News Challenge except that the Information Challenge is a matching-grant program meant to help place-based foundations “find creative ways to use new media and technology to engage and inform citizens” — with no emphasis on journalism in any particular sense (“FAQ: For Foundations,” n.d.). The Information Challenge is premised on the two-pronged belief that information is vital for democracy to function in communities, and that community-based foundations are best equipped to meet core local needs. Altogether, between the Knight Commission and the Information Challenge, the Knight Foundation has pivoted toward “information,” and away from “journalism,” as the focus of its innovation interest. This can be seen as more than merely a rhetorical shift, but indeed an actual structural change in refocusing the jurisdictional boundary markers (Abbott, 1988). As Ibargién said:

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<sup>6</sup> To learn more about the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy and its 2009 report, visit <http://www.knightcomm.org>.

The whole understanding of our quest being to inform communities in a democracy in an effective way, I think has *freed us* to consider a real range of project options that we almost certainly would never have done before. (personal communication)

The Knight Foundation, in effect, has been “freed” from the ideological constraints of operating within a field (journalism) that is struggling with a professional identity complex, facing perceptual and material threats, and therefore has gone into defense mode, becoming more insular (Witschge & Nygren, 2009) precisely at the time it needs to more fully engage outside interests. “Information,” by contrast, has no particular ideology, and therefore can be malleably shaped to suit a variety of circumstances—much as the term “platform” has been variously used to justify diverse forms and functions of digital media (Gillespie, 2010). By invoking “information” and “information needs,” the Knight Foundation has been able to communicate to and connect with a range of fields, foundations, and corporations in a way “that we almost certainly would never have done before” (Ibargüen, personal communication). Because “information” is an empty vessel, open to interpretation, it has enabled Knight to speak the language of others, even as it advances its own interests. Ibargüen said:

One of the lessons for me is that when I *used to talk about this as journalism*, I’d get the great glazing of the eyes, as people would say, “Get over yourself, you’re just not that important, you know!” And now I know to say, “OK, this matters, this is at the center of almost anything. *You tell me your subject, and I’ll tell you how information matters.*” (personal communication)

## CONCLUSION

The Knight Foundation argues that it has a history of entrepreneurship and risk-taking courage<sup>7</sup>, which it traces to the Knight brothers’ transformation of a small newspaper company in Akron, Ohio, into the nation’s largest newspaper chain. “The secret of the Knight papers is ideas, not dough,” Knight Newspapers editor Stuffy Walters once said. “We have no inhibitions. We’ll try anything.” In that same spirit, the foundation has made *transformation* the watchword of its recent efforts, because “transformation is about systemic ideas that are

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<sup>7</sup> In their study of “creative philanthropy,” Anheier and Leat (2006) include Knight among nine foundations they profile, because it “operates in a fast-changing field in which many threads and opportunities are present and frequently collide ... its grant-making program is informed by a passion for free press and democracy, and its activities are characterized by tenacity and risk-taking.” Moreover, “it is also a story of a foundation that is rooted in local communities while pursuing national and increasingly international agendas” (p. 163).

scalable, have broad support from a network of peers and partners, and are driven by social innovators and entrepreneurs” (Knight Foundation, n.d.).

*Transformation* is often invoked as hollow corporate-speak, but this notion of dramatic change can begin to describe what the foundation has sought to do both *with itself* and *to the field*. By examining a broad corpus of materials covering Knight’s development since the late 1990s, it is evident that the foundation has sought to innovate itself and the journalism field by renegotiating the rhetorical and actual boundaries of journalism work. Culturally, the foundation downplayed the emphasis on journalism professionalism from its past to embrace a more de-institutional approach that was more oriented to outside influence—e.g., the wisdom of the crowd, participatory forms of journalism, and a broader set of assumptions about what constitutes journalism and how it might occur in communities. These rhetorical adaptations paralleled changes in the Knight funding process, most notably in the development of the Knight News Challenge, which challenged conventional grant-funding methods as well as traditional understandings of journalism. In more recent times, however, the Knight Foundation has undergone a further evolution in moving from “journalism” to “information.” By downplaying its rootedness in the profession and highlighting its boundary-spanning interest in promoting “information” for communities, Knight has been able to free itself from the limitations of “journalism,” and thus expand its capital and influence as an agent of change among a broader set of fields, foundations, and funders.

Perhaps the most important finding here is that, under the guidance of Alberto Ibargüen, the Knight Foundation has reframed the “problem” of journalism in the digital age, away from the notion of saving newspapers (and, by extension, the profession itself) and toward the challenge of finding new ways to accomplish journalism’s core function of meeting the information needs of a community. As a result, the foundation has backed away from its longstanding embrace of professional expertise—both the news industry’s and its own—to acknowledge that the best solutions may come from the distributed crowd, operating outside the traditional boundaries of journalism. All of this, in turn, has led the foundation to give up some control over its own funding approach, and at the same time give up control over maintaining journalism’s boundary work (cf., Gieyrn, 1983). This serves to open up journalism, rhetorically and materially, and enables a foreign object like *participation* to become not only palatable but even indispensable to journalism and its future.



The implication of this shift in focus perhaps can be summarized this way: In trying to innovate journalism, the Knight Foundation actually has *stepped away from it*—breaking down boundaries of professionalism to invite external critique, contribution, and collaboration. Because of the foundation’s centrality to journalism, particularly in the United States, this change speaks to the influence that powerful actors may attempt to wield in changing the culture, ethics, and norms of the professions in which they operate, whether for good or ill. Ultimately, how the Knight Foundation’s journalism-to-information shift will change the nature of news, through initiatives like the Knight News Challenge and others to come, is an open question, and one that deserves further study for what it may suggest about the future of journalism and the information professions broadly.

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