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Civic Engagement and **COMMUNITY INFORMATION**

Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication

A WHITE PAPER BY PETER LEVINE


THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Communications and Society Program

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

A project of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program
and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication

A White Paper on the Civic Engagement Recommendations
of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs
of Communities in a Democracy

written by
Peter Levine



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Communications and Society Program
2011

The Aspen Institute and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation invite you to join the public dialogue around the Knight Commission's recommendations at www.knightcomm.org or by using Twitter hashtag #knightcomm.

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From Report to Action

Implementing the Recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy

In October 2009, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released its report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, with 15 recommendations to better meet community information needs.

Immediately following the release of *Informing Communities*, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation partnered to explore ways to implement the Commission's recommendations.

As a result, the Aspen Institute commissioned a series of white papers with the purpose of moving the Knight Commission recommendations from report into action. The topics of the commissioned papers include:

- Universal Broadband
- Digital and Media Literacy
- Public Media
- Government Transparency
- Online Hubs
- Civic Engagement
- Local Journalism
- Assessing the Information Health of Communities

The following paper is one of those white papers.

This paper is written from the perspective of the author individually. The ideas and proposals herein are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Aspen Institute, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the members of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, or any other institution. Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any person other than the author.

Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication

Executive Summary

Information by itself is inert. It begins to have value for a democracy when citizens turn it into knowledge and use it for public purposes. Unless citizens interpret, evaluate, and discuss the vast supply of data—everything from government spending to global temperatures—it cannot lead to civic action, let alone wise civic action. Thus, information developed and used by citizens creates public knowledge, which supports effective civic engagement.

To create and use knowledge, individuals must be organized. Formerly, many Americans were recruited to join a civil society of voluntary membership associations, newspapers, and face-to-face meetings that provided them with information, encouraged them to discuss and debate, and taught them skills of analysis, communication, and political or civic action. Many believe that traditional civil society is in deep decline.

Today, different institutions have the resources and motives to perform civic functions. There are also new tools and technologies available that may help, although it remains to be seen whether the new communications media by themselves are adequate to the task of civic renewal. One thing is clear: we must rebuild our public sphere with new materials, as our predecessors have done several times in the past.

In its landmark report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy made five recommendations (recommendations 11–15) that specifically address the goal of a reinvigorated public sphere. Toward achieving this goal and implementing the Knight Commission’s recommendations, this paper offers the following five strategies to revive civic communication.

Strategy 1: Create a Civic Information Corps using the nation’s “service” infrastructure to generate knowledge. Take advantage of the large and growing infrastructure of national and community service programs by requiring all service participants to learn civic communications skills and by creating a new Civic Information Corps—mainly young people who will use digital media to create and disseminate knowledge and information and connect people and associations.

Strategy 2: Engage universities as community information hubs. Take advantage of the nation's vast higher education sector by changing policies and incentives so that colleges and universities create forums for public deliberation and produce information that is relevant, coherent, and accessible to their local communities.

Strategy 3: Invest in face-to-face public deliberation. Take advantage of the growing practice of community-wide deliberative summits to strengthen democracy at the municipal level by offering training, physical spaces, and neutral conveners and by passing local laws that require public officials to pay attention to the results of these summits.

Strategy 4: Generate public "relational" knowledge. Take advantage of new tools for mapping networks and relationships to make transparent the structures of our communities and to allow everyone to have the kind of relational knowledge traditionally monopolized by professional organizers.

Strategy 5: Civic engagement for public information and knowledge. Take advantage of the diverse organizations concerned with civic communications to build an advocacy network that debates and defends public information and knowledge.

The paper concludes with a list of specific recommendations for action by a variety of institutions and by citizens themselves. The following institutions are called upon to help revive the civic communications sphere and foster a more productive, more democratic culture of civic engagement.

The Corporation for National and Community Service, with congressional authorization and appropriations, should create a Civic Information Corps that provides training, grants, and meetings for service organizations that emphasize the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The Corporation should also include the development of civic communications skills in desired learning outcomes for its programs. Congress should fund the Corporation for National and Community Service to do this work.

Federal agencies that fund research and scholarship (National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Endowment for the Arts) should fund and evaluate scholarship that benefits local communities as well as efforts to aggregate and disseminate such research. Agencies that address community-level problems, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency, should support community-wide public deliberations about those problems through a mix of grants, training, and technical assistance.

State and local governments should provide physical spaces for public deliberations. Local governments should fund and/or promote online knowledge hubs in partnership with other local institutions. They should also convene deliberative forums and support ongoing training for deliberative democracy.

School systems should make civic education a priority and include within the curriculum media and communications skills and service learning opportunities that involve media.

Colleges and universities should reward research and engagement that are helpful to their immediate geographical communities and make such research easily accessible to the public. They should make civic learning opportunities available to non-students. *Journalism schools and departments* in particular should play leading roles in creating and maintaining public information portals and related resources. Programs in library and information sciences should help design, maintain and evaluate public online archives, networks and relationship maps.

Foundations should support pilot projects to build civic communications infrastructure and skills. Special attention should be given to funding community-based nonprofits that serve marginalized populations, including non-college bound youth and young adults. Foundations can also fund *processes* such as public deliberations at the local level.

Citizens should seek opportunities to create and share public knowledge and discuss public issues; expect their governments to be open, transparent, and collaborative; volunteer to the best of their ability; and create and share knowledge about the networks and relationships in their communities.

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND
COMMUNITY INFORMATION:
FIVE STRATEGIES TO REVIVE
CIVIC COMMUNICATION**

Peter Levine

Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication

Skilled people, appropriate technologies, and reliable and relevant information are the building blocks of a successful communications environment. What generates news and information in that environment, however, is not just those building blocks. It is engagement—specifically, people’s engagement with information and with each other.

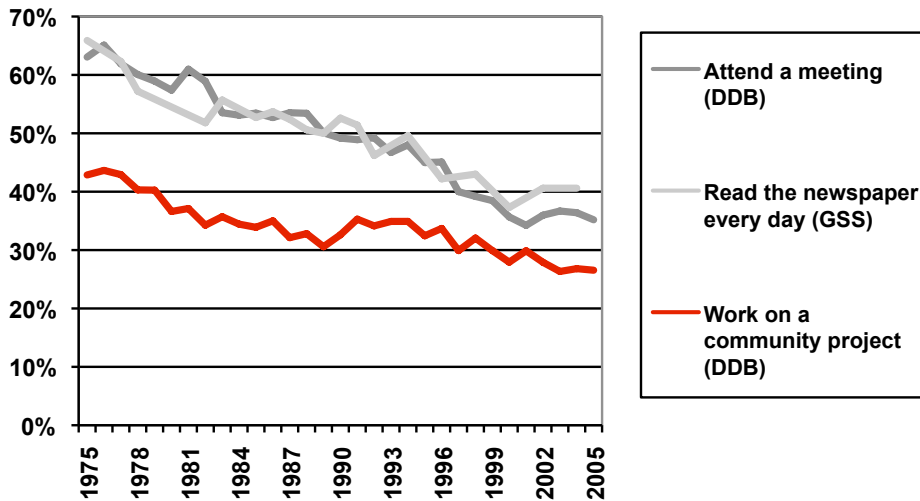
—*Informing Communities:
Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*

Introduction

By itself, information is inert. It needs interpretation, discussion, judgment, motivation, action, and production to become knowledge that is of any use in a democracy. The “public sphere” is the (metaphorical) space in which we make information into knowledge valuable for public purposes and connect it to action, production and power.

Traditionally, the American public sphere has been composed predominantly of various sorts of associations that promote discussion among their own members and between themselves and outsiders. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, the associations he observed were predominantly local, voluntary groups. They held regular face-to-face meetings. Their most important means for distributing knowledge and opinions were newspapers, which were carried by the U.S. mail. Associations needed newspapers to communicate and they arose in response to the news. Thus, Tocqueville wrote, “There is a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers: newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers. And if it has been correctly advanced that associations will increase in number as the conditions of men become more equal, it is not less certain that the number of newspapers increases in proportion to that of associations. Thus it is in America that we find at the same time the greatest number of associations and of newspapers” (Tocqueville, 1954).

The ecosystem that Tocqueville described flourished throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th century, but is now in steep decline, as shown by the trends in Exhibit 1:

Exhibit 1. Civic Participation and Newspaper Readership

Sources: GSS is General Social Survey. DDB is DDB Needham Life Style Survey. Analysis by the author.

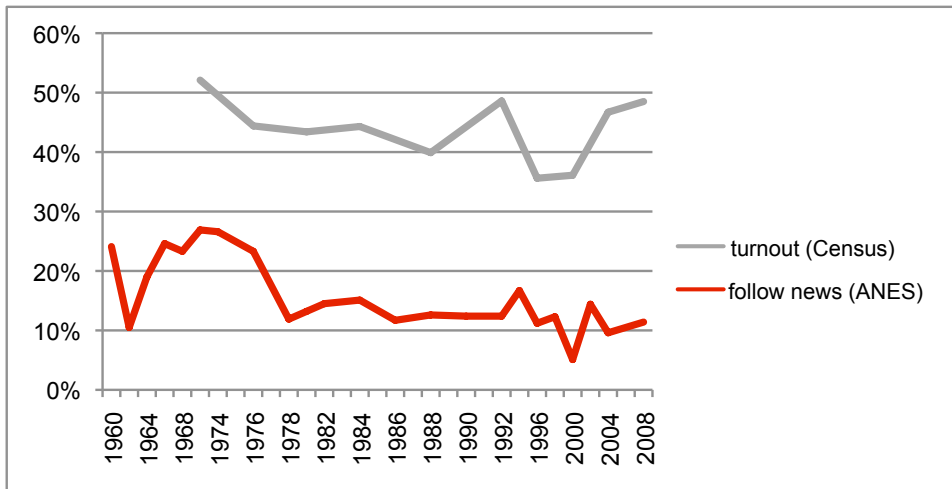
In light of Tocqueville's observations, the parallel lines for newspaper readership and attendance at face-to-face meetings are especially striking. We should be concerned by those declines if we value public deliberation, which has traditionally occurred within associations, at meetings, informed by newspapers (Cohen, 1999).

The declines shown above began before the Internet was widely used for virtual discussions and news. Therefore, it cannot be the case that people deliberately renounced face-to-face meetings and newspapers because they had online alternatives. But perhaps *after* the old order described by Tocqueville had badly decayed, people began to find online substitutes not shown in Exhibit 1.

Internet users are quite likely to say that they have looked for political or government-related information online and that they have discussed policies and issues online. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, "48 percent of Internet users have looked for information about a public policy or issue online with their local, state or federal government," and "23 percent of Internet users participate in the online debate around government policies or issues, with much of this discussion occurring outside of official government channels" (Smith, 2010). People who use the Internet are more likely to vote, volunteer, and join groups than those who are not online (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2010). As a group, they are also wealthier and better educated. All of these demographic factors could explain their higher levels of civic engagement. Young people who use social media (such as Facebook and YouTube) are more likely to volunteer, whether they are college students or working-class youth who have never attended college (Kirby, Marcelo & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009).

If the Internet has helped to restore civic society, we should see increases in civic engagement since 2000. Unfortunately, the survey questions that generated Exhibit 1 have not been continued since 2005. But Exhibit 2 shows the long-term trends in two other measures—voter turnout and attention to the news (i.e., the proportion of respondents who say that they follow the news and public affairs “most of the time” or “some of the time”)—for Americans between the ages of 18 and 24. Young Americans have adopted the Internet more rapidly than their older counterparts.

Exhibit 2. Young People’s Attention to News and Voter Turnout



Sources: U.S. Census and the American National Election Studies (ANES).

Youth voter turnout rose in presidential elections after 2000; and news interest has increased a bit, even as the traditional news media has suffered. These are promising developments, but society has a long way to go to recover levels of news interest seen among young people in previous decades. Although the turnout increase may be traced in part to new online civic tools, 2004 and 2008 were high-intensity presidential election years, and there are few reasons to be confident that youth turnout will remain high.

In short, it remains to be seen whether the new communications media alone are adequate to the task of civic renewal. But certainly the old civil society is in deep decay, and we must rebuild our public sphere with new materials, as our predecessors have done several times in the past. For instance, Americans of the founding era invented Committees of Correspondence, and citizens of the Progressive Era launched most of the large national membership organizations. Today’s building blocks include digital technologies and networks, as well as new forms of face-to-face association.

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (Knight Commission) makes the following recommendations that are related to civic engagement (I cite them using the numbers in the full report):

- Recommendation 11: Expand local media initiatives to reflect the entire reality of the communities they represent.
- Recommendation 12: Engage young people in developing the digital information and communication capacities of local communities.
- Recommendation 13: Empower all citizens to participate actively in community self-governance, including local “community summits” to address community affairs and pursue common goals.
- Recommendation 14: Emphasize community information flow in the design and enhancement of a local community’s public spaces.
- Recommendation 15: Ensure that every local community has at least one high-quality online hub.

This paper proposes five correlating strategies to advance these goals (for additional implementation strategies related to Recommendation 15, see also Adam Thierer’s white paper, *Creating Local Online Hubs: Three Models for Action*).

Strategy 1: Create a Civic Information Corps using the nation’s “service” infrastructure to generate knowledge

Community service and the combination of service with academic study (“service-learning”) have rapidly grown and now represent an important resource for communities’ information needs. This is a positive development that can be used to reconstruct the public sphere; but to do so will require reforming our service programs.

Since the 1980s, civilian service has been institutionalized with funded programs, paid professionals, and rewards. Most importantly, the federal government launched AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National Service (later, the Corporation for National and Community Service) in 1993. There is no single “corps” in AmeriCorps; instead, the Corporation funds intermediaries that include national nonprofits with diverse models and constituencies—City Year and Public Allies are two well-known examples—plus schools, universities, Native American nations, and local nonprofits. Other components of the national service movement that do not receive AmeriCorps funds include YouthBuild, the Peace Corps,

and the Corps Network. Meanwhile, some large school districts and universities and one state (Maryland) have enacted service requirements for all their students. Several states and major cities also have official service commissions. High school students perceive a need to volunteer in order to be competitive applicants to college (Friedland & Morimoto, 2005).

Probably as a result of these incentives, opportunities, and requirements, three quarters of high school seniors reported volunteering at least “sometimes” by the year 2003, up from 63 percent in 1975, according to data from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research’s *Monitoring the Future* study. Eighty percent of incoming college freshmen surveyed by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute reported having volunteered in high school. The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that about 8 million Americans age 16–24 volunteered in 2008 (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2009). These trends received an extra boost in 2009, when Congress passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which authorizes tripling AmeriCorps to 250,000 annual full-time service positions.

“Service” activities range widely, and some have little connection to knowledge or information. It is not uncommon for the young people involved in service to be bused to a park or an urban street and simply asked to pick up bottles or paint walls. AmeriCorps as a whole does not specify learning outcomes or require intellectually challenging opportunities for youth. Much emphasis is placed on the work performed, e.g., the number of homes weatherized.

On the other hand, certain service projects generate public knowledge to an extraordinary extent. For example:

- **1,500 Bonner Scholars** at 24 colleges and universities are all involved in community service and other forms of civic engagement, such as community research. Using a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Learn and Serve America program), the Bonner Foundation promotes the use of social media tools—such as wikis and videos—by all of its scholars. Methods involve social-media trainings at all of its meetings and conferences, an elaborate online platform for shared work at each campus and nationally, and 10 competitive subgrants to Bonner campuses that do more intensive work with social media. At the heart of the online platform is a wiki site with hundreds of documents on social issues, student projects, tools, and best practices. After receiving the Learn and Serve America grant, Bonner began to plan PolicyOptions, an additional wiki platform for news and policy background information that will enable campuses to establish local, campus-based PolicyOptions Bureaus that are affiliated through a national network, sharing information and a common web platform.

- **Cabrini Connections:** With funds originally from the Cricket Island Foundation, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) funded young people in the Cabrini-Green Housing Projects in Chicago to document the full story of their community, which is nationally famous for its murder rate but has many other dimensions. Cabrini Connections today is rich with documentary videos, research reports, and photo essays (www.cabriniconnections.net/mission).

These examples are meant to illustrate two large bodies of activity: one in colleges/universities and the other aimed at teenagers. Although independent evaluations are scarce, these examples (and many like them) seem to be strong on two dimensions: they provide valuable community service in the form of knowledge, and they educate their participants by developing advanced skills, including skills related to information. In essence, they have two functions: *creating* and *distributing* public knowledge.

Building a Corps of Civic Technology Coordinators: The Social Capital Inc. Model

Social Capital Inc. (SCI) is a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that seeks to increase local civic engagement and social capital through a variety of initiatives that connect diverse individuals and organizations in the community. Since its founding in 2002, SCI has incorporated information and communications technologies as essential components of its programs to connect people, foster civic engagement, and build healthier communities. SCI currently serves ten communities in the state.

With funding assistance from the Corporation for National and Community Service, SCI is now in its fourth year of placing a team of AmeriCorps members in four of its partner communities—Dorchester, Fall River, Lynn, and Woburn—to serve as Outreach and Technology Coordinators. These young adults are charged with using both digital technology and more traditional “offline” outreach in the community to connect residents to civic information and encourage them to participate by volunteering and attending public meetings and community events. Outreach and Technology Coordinators are placed at SCI community partner organizations, which include community health centers, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and local community based organizations.

One central task of the Coordinators is maintaining and promoting community portals developed by SCI. Each portal includes a community calendar, listing of volunteer opportunities, searchable information on community resources, news of public meetings, community events, and other local happenings. Coordinators also publish a weekly electronic newsletter that highlights the latest community information and encourages readers to visit the website for more information. More recently, the Coordinators have been using social media (Facebook and Twitter) as additional channels for sharing this information and engaging with community residents.

The Outreach and Technology Coordinators also make frequent presentations to community members and organizations about the SCI community websites and other online community resources.

They conduct workshops on basic computer literacy topics and how to use social media. The Coordinators themselves start the year with training to help them develop the outreach and technical skills they need for their work with the community. While they typically arrive with good general technology skills, most Coordinators require training in how to apply these skills in a community-building context.

SCI measures the impact of its initiatives to build civic information resources through community surveys, and the results are promising. Over 10,000 individuals per month now use the SCI community portal tools; usage has climbed significantly since SCI has had the AmeriCorps team in this role. Seventy-five percent of respondents to one SCI survey indicated that they have been more civically active as a result of having the SCI online resources available.

The SCI team has been able to leverage technology to address a wide range of pressing needs in the communities it serves. Examples include organizing information about resources available to local Haitian families in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; creating a computer class at the Codman Square Tech Center in Dorchester, where residents of this diverse community can learn Word and Excel skills and how to construct a resume; hosting an online discussion about needs of low-income Woburn students which led to a collection of back to school supplies for them; connecting an isolated elderly resident to a neighbor who volunteered to help with snow removal; and increasing participation at public meetings.

The Knight Commission report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, calls for a “Geek Corps for Local Democracy,” consisting of college graduates who would “help local government officials, librarians, police, teachers, and other community leaders leverage networked technology.” Corps members would educate local partners and also form a national learning network.

That sounds like a good idea, but I would relax two implied limitations. First, I would broaden eligibility well beyond college graduates. Just over half of adults between the ages of 20 and 29 have any college experience at all, and a majority of those do not hold four-year college degrees (Kiesa & Marcelo, 2009). A domestic Geek Corps need not be limited to the quartile that is most successful (or privileged) in conventional ways. Many talented individuals who are not on the college track would benefit from service and might contribute more than college graduates in terms of local knowledge and cultural savvy.

Second, I would not limit their role to merely providing technical support for the nonprofit information technology (IT) infrastructure; I would involve them in *creating and disseminating knowledge and culture*. The best format might be a new corps. Alternatively, the federal government might provide incentives for various kinds of service groups and organizations to focus on community knowledge. These groups would not be required to focus narrowly on information or communications. If knowledge was an important byproduct of their work, they could join the national learning network, which would be separately funded and staffed.

In practical terms, if you organized after-school service activities for teenagers in, say, Chicago, and you emphasized community-based research, reporting, photo documentation, mapping, archiving local records online or IT support for nonprofits you could qualify as a “community knowledge producer.” You would then be able to send a designee to meetings, apply for training opportunities, log onto a virtual learning network, and apply for specialized grants.

Meanwhile, AmeriCorps as a whole should have learning objectives for all its quarter of a million projected members, and those objectives should include learning to use information for civic purposes.

There is a valid concern that broadening the mandate of the Civic Information Corps might weaken its focus and impact. Much depends on scale. Communication is such an important civic function—and youth have so much to learn and contribute by helping civil society to communicate—that there is a case for a truly ambitious Civic Information Corps that has substantial funding and a large core professional staff. The congressionally approved budget for the Corporation for National and Community Service in FY 2011 is \$1.366 billion. If 10 percent were ultimately spent on service projects with elements of communications and information-provision, the total funding would be more than \$100 million per year. With that kind of investment, there would be plenty of capacity to broaden the role of the Civic Information Corps as advocated here (i.e., to include all youth and to support cultural as well as technological activities). However, if communications work were actually funded at a much lower level—say, at less than \$10 million per year—it might be wise to focus it more narrowly. In that case, I would advocate a focus on non-college-attending 18- to 25-year-olds who are interested in careers in information technology.

A Civic Information Corps would be an experiment. It is impossible to predict its effects in advance, but the objectives would be (1) to raise the civic information skills of the participants themselves, (2) to raise their conventional civic engagement (voting, volunteering and attention to public issues) in a lasting way, and (3) to increase the civic information skills and conventional civic engagement of other Americans by providing communities with substantive, relevant, engaging knowledge.

Strategy 2: Engage universities as community information hubs

Colleges and universities can play a central role as neutral sponsors, brokers, curators, and disseminators of information for their local communities, replacing some of the traditional functions of the metropolitan daily newspaper.

Most people and organizations that produce, exchange, and interpret information have their own axes to grind. They have ideological or philosophical commitments as well as interests to promote—and that is perfectly appropriate. Yet

we have always been better off when a few institutions “declare neutrality.” They volunteer for the role of promoting high-quality discussion, debate, and analysis and they try not to drive everyone to a particular conclusion.

An example is the metropolitan daily newspaper as envisioned in the Progressive Era. I realize that no newspaper was ever fully neutral, nor was neutrality ever the highest criterion of excellence. But metropolitan dailies adopted rules and procedures that were influenced by the ideal of neutrality, such as the separation of their editorial pages from their news pages. Citizens could criticize them and even withhold their business if they failed to be fair, balanced, objective, and accurate. To varying but important degrees, they *did* enhance public dialogue with neutral information.

But the metropolitan daily newspaper is in grim condition today. Public broadcasting stations have a similar mission, and NPR’s audience is rising even as newspapers falter (Kaplan, 2010). But even if public media “can transform into hubs that bring communities together, facilitate dialogue and curate vital information,” as Barbara Cochran has written in her *Rethinking Public Media* white paper, most are not positioned to do so today and broadcasters cannot play this role alone (Cochran, 2010). Certain civic associations traditionally provided information, explanations, and balanced debates for communities. But membership in such organizations, like newspapers, is in steep decline (as shown above in Exhibit 1).

Colleges and universities must step up and help fill the knowledge and discussion gap created by the decline of newspapers and civic associations. Universities have self-interested reasons to be concerned about civic health. As Community Wealth notes, “Institutions of higher education have an obvious vested interest in building strong relationships with the communities that surround their campuses. They do not have the option of relocating and thus are of necessity place-based anchors. While corporations, businesses, and residents often flee from economically depressed low-income urban and suburban edge-city neighborhoods, universities remain” (The Democracy Collaborative, n.d.).

Moreover, higher education is not just any sector with \$136 billion in annual spending and \$100 billion in real estate holdings. The business of colleges and universities is the production and dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of dialogue and debate. They provide an impressive infrastructure for serving their communities’ information needs. And some are already excellent models.

Portland State University (PSU) in Oregon has chosen the motto “Let Knowledge Serve the City.” Since the early 1990s, the university has tried to align much of its teaching, research, and outreach to address specific issues in the city. A hallmark of its approach is lengthy, ambitious, multi-year projects that involve formal partnerships between several units within the university and several community-based organizations or networks and local governmental agencies.

Over a five-year period, as part of one coherent effort to protect a watershed (composed of urban streams), numerous classes of PSU students collected environmental and social data, educated local children and developed high school curricula, created videos, facilitated public discussions of the watershed, and directly cleaned up wetlands and constructed facilities. These classes did not work alone but in close cooperation with each other and with a large array of civic organizations (Williams & Bernstine, 2001, pp. 261-262).

PSU brings impressive resources to such work: 17,000 students, scholars and laboratories, purchasing power, and facilities—none of which can be picked up and moved to another location. The university and the city share a fate, and the university understands that. Its commitments extend well beyond watersheds: its partnership with city schools is equally ambitious, and there are other examples. The university has encouraged its faculty to deliberate issues that arise when an educational institution addresses a city's problems, using study circles as the format for these discussions.

Certain networks exist to promote such work nationally, notably Campus Compact (an association of 1,000 college presidents who have committed to “lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education”); the American Democracy Project of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU); and The Democracy Imperative.

Three specific elements of higher education deserve mention because their missions and assets align well with the goal of producing, aggregating, and disseminating information of relevance to communities:

- Land-grant universities have an especially strong heritage of local public service and a remarkable resource in their extension offices, which exist in virtually every county in the United States.
- Journalism programs and schools have expertise essential for producing accessible, timely, online public media—a point recognized by the Civic and Citizen Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (<http://sustainablejournalism.org>).
- University libraries and librarians also have assets and expertise to contribute and a professional sense of obligation to do so.

Journalism School Serves Local Information Needs: USC Annenberg's Alhambra Project

When the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication launched its *Alhambra Source* website (<http://www.alhambrasource.org>) in 2010, it was not merely the debut of a hyperlocal news site in one of many communities surrounding Los Angeles. It was an important milestone in a research project begun in 2008 by USC Annenberg researchers to create a multilingual local news site that responds to community information needs. It also represents a significant commitment by the journalism school and the staff of the news site to contribute their knowledge, technical expertise, and resources toward improving the level of civic engagement and the lives of non-student residents in the multiethnic city of Alhambra, located just east of Los Angeles.

USC Annenberg chose Alhambra because of its limited media coverage and ethnically and linguistically diverse population, which is 52% Asian, 36% Latino, and 11% Anglo. With the goal of embedding the news site into the fabric of the community, researchers first needed to learn more about the community and its information needs. "We're reaching out to where they are, not saying, 'Here we are. Come to us,'" said USC communications professor Sandra Ball-Rokeach at the time of the news site's launch.

Alhambra Source is becoming an important information portal for the city. Professional journalists, web developers, USC researchers and students, and Alhambra residents and organizations work collaboratively to develop the site and produce original reporting about the community. The Source is also an important forum for residents to post or learn about events, announcements, and other local matters. Content appears in English, Spanish and Chinese. The site includes sections on Schools, City Government, Police/Fire, Arts, Food, Business, History, and Youth Feed. The History section features articles about past and current residents and serves as an accessible civic archive on the history of Alhambra. Youth Feed is a high school journalism program run by *Alhambra Source* to train local youth in basic media and journalism skills and explore multimedia storytelling about Alhambra. Youth Feed engages young people in the process of creating public knowledge and fosters an ethic of civic engagement.

From the start of the project, Rokeach and her team monitored Chinese and Spanish-language media and conducted focus groups to identify the issues that are important to residents of the community. They studied maps and census data, visited local organizations, and interviewed local officials and businesses owners. Research in the community is ongoing via the USC Metamorphosis Project. Insights are shared every other week via posts on the site (e.g., "Why did the western San Gabriel Valley rank lowest in neighborhood belonging?") and residents can post comments. Getting to know the community better was integral to designing a news and information portal that serves the community well. Project leaders expect that continuing to share that knowledge with the community will boost civic engagement in Alhambra and yield new insights to inform the broader field of communication research.

But significant reforms must be achieved before colleges will provide community information hubs. Appendix II of the Knight Report suggests some action steps. Three of its recommendations involve various kinds of civics *courses*. They include courses open to people not enrolled in university, which is very important, because current college students represent only a small (and relatively privileged) slice of the population. The Appendix also calls for universities to reward “faculty research relevant to local issues that is shared through public outreach initiatives.”

I would recommend a somewhat broader agenda for making colleges and universities information hubs.

Universities must accept this as one of their important missions, not only in abstract statements, but as a matter of real investment. Providing timely information of local relevance and with input from neighbors trades off against other intellectual pursuits. Overwhelmingly, rewards and prestige flow to scholars whose work is original and generalizable. Communities need work that is true, relevant to them, and accessible to them. Universities can produce some of both, but they cannot add more local work without subtracting a bit of something else. Creating community information hubs within higher education requires at least a modest shift of priorities.

Universities must aggregate the scattered knowledge produced by their professors, students, and staff. One of the advantages of the traditional metro daily newspaper was its format—a manageable slice of information every day, with the top news on the front page, a few hundred words of debate in the letters column, and space for the occasional in-depth feature. In contrast, a great modern university produces a flood of material for an array of audiences. Universities need to think about common web portals that accumulate and organize all their work relevant to their physical locations.

Universities must adopt appropriate principles and safeguards. You can do good by going forth into a community to study it, to portray it, and to stir up discussion about it. Or you can do harm. Much depends on how you relate to your fellow citizens off campus. Relationships should be respectful and characterized by learning in both directions. In this context, “research ethics” means far more than the protection of human subjects from harm; ethical research is directed to genuine community interests and needs, and builds other people’s capacity for research and debate. Like faculty, students must be fully prepared to do community service well, and to be held accountable for their impact. One tool that has been proposed to uphold such principles is a community review board (composed of community leaders, faculty, and students), which would have to approve all projects funded as “community service.”

Most of the incentives that prevail in higher education work against becoming community information hubs. When the incentives in a free and competitive market undermine the common good, some outside force should reward the behavior that we need. In this case, the federal and state governments, and private foundations should channel some of their funds toward local information projects in higher education. They might start by endowing, or otherwise providing stable, lasting support for a few pilot or demonstration sites. In these communities, we should see increases in public deliberation, public knowledge of issues, and conventional forms of civic engagement—such as voting—as a result of the free information and venues that the universities provide. Other funders might imitate the National Centers for Minority Health and Health Disparities (NCMHD), which has made grants to universities to convene community members to discuss and choose their most important health priorities. Medical researchers then address those priorities through health interventions that they develop in collaboration with the same residents. In such cases, government grants to universities fund public deliberation.

Strategy 3: Invest in face-to-face public deliberation

Recommendation 13 in the Knight Commission's *Informing Communities* report is "Empower all citizens to participate actively in community self-governance, including local 'community summits' to address community affairs and pursue common goals."

Face-to-face discussions of community issues have been found to produce good policies and the political will to support these policies, to educate the participants, and to enhance solidarity and social networks. In the terms of the Knight Commission report, they turn mere information into public judgment and public will. I am still moved by the Australian participant in a planning meeting who said, "I just can't believe we did it; we finally achieved what we set out to do. It's the most important thing I've ever done in my whole life, I suppose" (Gastil & Levine, 2005, p. 81).

I would recommend investment in face-to-face deliberation, even though online forums (and hybrids of online and face-to-face media) have promise. Minnesota E-Democracy (<http://forums.e-democracy.org>), Front Porch Forum in Burlington, Vermont (<http://frontporchforum.com>), and other community-based online forums do seem to build social capital and civic capacity while promoting discussion of public issues. As the National League of Cities notes, online forums can "engage technologically savvy young people" and include "busy parents or elderly residents who might not be able to attend community meetings in person" (National League of Cities, 2011). But the successful online forums in the United States have not been *deliberations*. A deliberation yields formal input on policy or makes binding decisions. When deliberations have been conducted online and

open to all, they have frequently yielded disastrous results. Some have been deliberately flooded by people with shared policy objectives or disrupted by activists who simply want to embarrass the organizers. For example, the White House Open Government Forum on Transparency was established to collect formal input but was all but hijacked by proponents of legalizing marijuana (Trudeau, 2009).

I acknowledge that some examples of “e-consultations” from overseas have been successful (see, for example, Peters & Abud, 2009), but I believe that online forums are vulnerable to deliberate manipulation that could easily become routine if governments began to use them widely. In the United States, the most successful online deliberations have been limited to randomly selected participants who statistically represent the public as a whole. Because invitations are random, organized groups cannot flood these discussions with their own members (Lazer, Neblo, Esterling, & Goldschmidt, 2009). But it is problematic in a democracy to limit participation to a chosen few.

Fortunately, many *offline* deliberations have been successful (Gastil & Levine, 2005). The inconvenience of attending seems to discourage disruptive behavior, and the disclosure of real names and faces encourages civility. As the *Informing Communities* report notes, “As powerful as the Internet is for facilitating human connection, face-to-face contact remains the foundation of community building.”

The following case studies of New Orleans, Louisiana; Bridgeport, Connecticut; and Hampton, Virginia are three examples of successful community problem solving built around public engagement and deliberation.

New Orleans, Louisiana. After Hurricane Katrina, questions of how and where to rebuild became extraordinarily contentious and divisive by race and class. The city was deluged with “civic engagement” in the form of voluntary and charitable contributions, but there was no coherent or legitimate plan for how to allocate scarce resources from the government, businesses, and civil society. Mayor C. Ray Nagin, the New Orleans City Council, and the New Orleans City Planning Commission launched the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) process to create such a framework. Built into the process were three Community Congresses that engaged 4,000 citizens, including dispersed residents of New Orleans who were living in more than 16 other cities nationwide. AmericaSpeaks, a national nonprofit that developed the 21st Century Town Meeting format for large, public deliberations, organized two out of the three congresses. At the end of the process, 92 percent of participants agreed that the plan they had helped to create should go forward. In June 2007, the New Orleans City Council and the Louisiana Recovery Authority approved the \$14.5 billion plan.

Bridgeport, Connecticut. This old port and manufacturing city of 139,000 people was an economic basket case in the 1980s. The schools were so troubled that 274 teachers were arrested during a strike in 1978. The town was hard hit by the loss of manufacturing jobs, rising crime, and the flight of middle-class residents to

the suburbs. The city filed for bankruptcy in 1991. The next mayor was sentenced to nine years in federal prison for corruption.

Bridgeport is now doing much better, to the point that its school system was one of five finalists for the national Broad Prize for Urban Education in both 2006 and 2007. Deliberation played a central role in Bridgeport's renaissance.

In 1996, a local nonprofit group called the Bridgeport Public Education Fund (BPEF, <http://bpef.org>) contacted organizers who specialize in convening diverse citizens to discuss issues, without promoting an ideology or a particular diagnosis. No one knows how many forums and discussions took place in Bridgeport, or how many citizens participated, because the 40 official "Community Conversations" were widely imitated in the city. But it is clear that at least hundreds of citizens participated, that many individuals moved from one public conversation to another, and that some developed advanced skills for organizing and facilitating such conversations. A community summit convened in 2006—fully 10 years after the initial discussion—drew 500 people. The mayor, the superintendent, the city council, and the board of education had agreed in advance to support the plan that participants developed (Friedman, Kadlec & Birnback, 2007; Fagotto & Fung, 2009).

So far, I have described talk, but the civic engagement process in Bridgeport involves work as well. For example, each school has a leadership team that includes parents, neighborhood residents, and students along with professional educators. The team has power over school budgets and strategic plans (Zarlengo & Betz, 2002). The professionals in leadership team meetings and other public forums take what they learn back into their daily work. People who are employed by other institutions, such as businesses and religious congregations, also take direction from the public discussions. Meanwhile, citizens are inspired to act as volunteers. The school district has a large supply of adult mentors, many of them participate in forums and discussions. In turn, their hands-on service provides information and insights that enrich community conversations and improve decisions.

Bridgeport's citizens have shown that they are capable of making tough choices: for instance, shifting limited resources from teen after-school programs to programs for younger children. There is much more collaboration today among businesses, non-profits, and government agencies. Everyone feels that they share responsibility; problems are not left to the school system and its officials. The school superintendent said, "I've never seen anything like this. The community stakeholders at the table were adamant about this. They said, 'We're up front with you. The school district can't do it by itself. We own it too'" (Friedman, et al, 2007).

Hampton, Virginia. This is another blue-collar port city of about 145,000 people. Like Bridgeport, Hampton has struggled with deindustrialization, although Hampton benefits from military and NASA facilities within the city.

When Hampton decided to create a new strategic plan for youth and families in the early 1990s, the city started by enlisting more than 5,000 citizens in discussions

that led to a citywide meeting and then the adoption of a formal plan. “Youth, parents, community groups, businesses, and youth workers and advocates...met separately for months, with extensive outreach and skilled facilitation” (Sirianni & Schor, 1999).

The planning process ultimately created an influential Hampton Youth Commission (<http://hampton.gov/youth>) whose 24 commissioners are adolescents, and a new city office to work with them. The Youth Commission sits on top of a pyramid of civic opportunities for young people. There are also community service programs that involve most of the city’s youth: empowered principals’ advisory groups in each school, a special youth advisory group for the school superintendent, paid adolescent planners in the planning department, and youth police advisory councils whom the police chief contacts whenever a violent incident involves teenagers. Young people are encouraged to climb the pyramid from service projects toward the citywide commission, gaining skills and knowledge along the way. The system for youth engagement won Hampton the Innovation in Government Award from Harvard University in 2007.

Engagement is not limited to young residents. When Hampton’s leaders decided that race relations and racial equity were significant concerns in their southern community—almost equally divided between whites and African Americans—they convened at least 250 citizens in small, mixed-race groups called Study Circles. The participants decided that there was a need to build better skills for working together across racial lines, so they created and began to teach a set of courses—collectively known as “Diversity College”—that trains local citizens to be speakers, board members, and organizers of discussions (Potapchuk, Carlson & Kennedy, 2005).

Hampton’s neighborhood planning process has broadened from determining the zoning map to addressing complex social issues. Planning groups include residents as well as city officials, and each may take more than a year to develop a comprehensive plan. Like the young people who helped write the youth sections of the City Plan, the residents who develop neighborhood plans emphasize their own assets and capabilities rather than their needs. There is an “attitude of ‘what the neighborhood can do with support from the city’ rather than ‘what the city should do with the neighborhood watching and waiting for it to happen’” (Potapchuk, et al, 2005).

Hampton has thoroughly reinvented its government and civic culture so that thousands of people are directly involved in city planning, educational policy, police work, and economic development. Residents and officials use a whole range of practical techniques for engaging citizens—from “youth philanthropy” (the Youth Commission makes \$40,000 in small grants each year for youth-led projects) to “charrettes” (intensive, hands-on, architectural planning sessions that yield actual designs for buildings and sites). The prevailing culture of the city is deliberative; people truly listen, share ideas, and develop consensus, despite differences of interest and ideology. Young people hold positions of responsibility and leadership. Youth have made believers out of initially suspicious police offi-

cers, planners, and school administrators. These officials testify that the policies proposed by youth and other citizens are better than alternatives floated by their colleagues alone. The outcomes are impressive, as well. For example, the students in the school system now perform well on standardized tests.

I would draw the conclusion that is also implicit in the title of Carmen Sirianni's recent book, *Investing in Democracy*: you cannot get "community summits" and other forms of excellent engagement on the cheap. They take a long-term effort and resources that are normally a mixture of money, policies, and people's volunteered or paid time. To yield sustainable results, a summit should be embedded in a deeper and more lasting deliberative infrastructure. Hampton's system, for example, depended on an initial federal grant and then consistent in-kind and cash investments from the city.

In order to make real-world deliberations work, several conditions must be met:

1. There must be some kind of organizer or convening organization that is trusted as neutral and fair and that has the skills and resources to pull off a genuine public deliberation. Several national non-profits have reputations for playing that role: Everyday Democracy, Public Conversations Project, the Center for Deliberative Polling, the Jefferson Center, the National Issues Forum Institute, and *AmericaSpeaks*, among others. At this time, there is no independent way of assessing their quality and reliability. A formal process of assessing and certifying deliberation-organizers may be valuable.
2. People must be able to convene in spaces that are safe, comfortable, dignified, and regarded as neutral ground. If large community summits are contemplated, there must be physical spaces capacious and affordable enough in every community to accommodate an *AmericaSpeaks* 21st Century Town Meeting or its equivalent. Because the construction of entirely new spaces for public meetings seems overly expensive and ambitious, a more practical strategy would be to expand proposals to serve other functions. For instance, new convention centers should be built so that they can handle public meetings as well as regular conventions.
3. There must be some reason for participants to believe that powerful institutions will listen to the results of their discussions. It may take a formal agreement among power centers, or even a law that requires public engagement, to give other participants hope that they can effect change. Or they may simply believe that their numbers will be large enough—and their commitment intense enough—that authorities will be unable to ignore them.
4. There must be recruitment and training programs: not just brief orientations before a session, but more intensive efforts to build skills and commitments. Ideally, moments of discussion will be embedded in ongoing

civic work (volunteering, participation in associations, and the day jobs of paid professionals), so that participants can draw on their work experience and take direction and inspiration from the discussions. There must be pathways for adolescents and other newcomers to enter the deliberations.

If all four preconditions are met, we should see measurable increases across whole communities (not just among the participants themselves) in civic knowledge, trust in other citizens, and civic action such as voting, volunteering, and advocacy.

Strategy 4: Generate public “relational” knowledge

Citizens need facts about organizations, leaders, and issues. They need rival interpretations of those facts, and deliberative public judgments based on such interpretations. Citizens also need to understand the *relationships* among people, organizations, and issues.

Competent civic and political actors have always held in their heads implicit “network maps” that link ideas, organizations, and individuals in their community. They know, for example, that if they want to talk to the leader of the town, they should go through an accessible individual whom the leader regularly consults, if not the leader himself. If someone raises a local issue, they can link it to relevant organizations and to related issues.

In recent years, three developments have underlined the importance of relational thinking. One is “The New Science of Networks,” as Albert-László Barabási subtitles his book *Linked*. This science is the mathematical exploration of nodes and network ties as they arise under various conditions, and it has yielded powerful insights, such as the value of “weak ties” and the importance of individuals who connect disparate communities.

The second development is the enormous popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, which are driven by webs of relationships. These sites have popularized the concept of network ties and underlined their importance. But Facebook and other corporate social networks keep the relational data—the “network map”—to themselves. They do so to protect users’ privacy and also to give themselves a valuable asset. For example, to reach everyone at Tufts who has a Facebook account, we must pay Facebook to advertise. We cannot see a list of users who have Tufts connections.

The third development is the art of relational organizing. Relational organization groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, and the Gamaliel Foundation do not begin with clear and fixed goals. They decide what their causes should be by means of long periods

of listening and discussing within diverse networks that they carefully nurture. They are highly skilled at mapping networks to identify power relationships, excluded groups, and key hubs (Warren, 2001).

The next step is to democratize the possession of effective network maps, so that they do not exist only in the brains of skilled organizers or on the servers of Facebook and MySpace. Informed communities should not merely have access to discrete facts and lists of organizations, nor should they be satisfied with geographical maps that show the physical location of organizations. They should be able to build and consult public network maps that allow them to identify power, influence, exclusion, division, and other attributes of relationships, not of individuals.

The *Informing Communities* report states, “Just as communities depend on maps of physical space, they should create maps of information flow that enable members to connect to the data and information they want.... The best of these hubs would go beyond the mere aggregation of links and act as an online guidebook.” That is correct, but I would emphasize the importance of revealing relationships among both offline and online organizations within any community. After all, Google is extremely effective at producing lists of local groups, and such lists can also be displayed geospatially. But relationships are often opaque, especially when they involve power. Making them transparent takes civic work.

By tracking changes in the relationships among civil society actors over time, we can also help realize the Knight Commission’s Recommendation 5: “Develop systematic quality measures of community information ecologies, and study how they affect social outcomes.” When measuring a community’s civic ecology, most experts today would assess “social capital.” In the canonical definition of Robert Putnam, social capital means norms or attitudes of cooperation (such as trust) plus network ties that help people get things done (Putnam, 2000). The standard way to measure network ties is to ask proxy questions on surveys, such as how many groups individuals belong to. But the most direct, accurate, and informative method would be to map actual civic networks and compare their extent and density over time. Network mapping is a technical matter, but laypeople can examine a graphical representation of a civic network, assess whether it is fractured or cohesive, and decide how to address its weaknesses.

In collaboration with Lewis A. Friedland and his colleagues at Community Knowledgebase, LLC (<http://ckbsoftware.com>), CIRCLE has been experimenting with public network maps in two contexts:

- We have begun to create computer-based games in which classes of high school or middle school students quickly generate network maps of local issues, organizations, and people. Students pool their knowledge to produce a sophisticated understanding.

- We are also in the midst of creating an open network for the Boston metro area in which nodes will be organizations or issues, and anyone will be able to add to the map, use it to recruit volunteers, or navigate it to explore the structure of this region's civil society. It is not ready for a public launch, but one can explore the map at <http://MyBlink.org>.

Mapping Civic Networks: Community Knowledgebase's Youth Map

Youth Map is a social networking platform that helps students visualize connections between people, resources, and issues in order to address issues and problems in their local communities. Youth Map was developed by Community Knowledgebase, LLC, in partnership with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), for service-learning in American schools and youth programs. Youth Map uses information gathered through interviews with key members of the community to create multilayered maps of civic networks. Such civic mapping can help to identify power, influence, divisions, and other features of relationships that help to influence information flows and shape the culture of the community.

Youth Map integrates three kinds of mapping activities: *concept maps*, *social network maps*, and *geographic information systems*. *Concept maps* build an initial picture of how the local community functions. *Social network maps* illustrate connections among specific local institutions and organizations, such as businesses, government, nonprofits, and other community organizations. *Geographic information systems* map these onto geographic space, where users may then add demographic, environmental, and other data sets related to the problems or issues under investigation.

Youth Map is also integrated into the Legislative Aide computer game, in which students working in small groups play legislative aides to a simulated elected official. Players conduct one-on-one interviews with real-life members of their community then use Youth Map in order to see how resources and information are linked within the community.

Since its initial testing in Baltimore in 2007, Legislative Aide has also been used in Tampa as a tool to increase students' content-area knowledge and promote civic engagement through interaction with teachers, peers, and community members. That experiment was supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Similar network mapping technology is also embedded in an open web tool called B-Link, intended for college students and others in the Boston metropolitan area, that is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (<http://MyBlink.org>).

These are just preliminary experiments. They do not yet harness the full potential of network analysis and visualization, nor the power of computers to harvest network data automatically from websites. My basic recommendation is that citizens should collect and publicize relational data. The local online information hubs recommended by the Knight Commission (see Recommendation 15) would be excellent places to present the data in interactive formats. Adam Thierer of George Mason University's Mercatus Center has written a separate white paper,

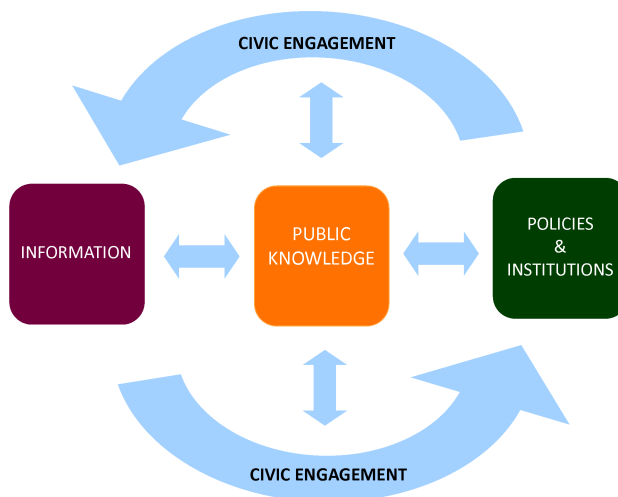
Creating Local Online Hubs: Three Models for Action, that describes three models for creating local online hubs with public information at the center (Thierer, 2011). Governments and foundations can help by investing in citizens' efforts. The results should include more frequent and more effective collaborative action by citizens.

Strategy 5: Civic engagement for public information and knowledge

Civic engagement has at least two important links to information and knowledge. First, information that people create and use enables them to be more effective as citizens. Second, citizens must ensure that they and their descendants have access to good information and knowledge and the means to use it effectively. Institutions affect public knowledge, and citizens can affect the policies of institutions. Seen this second way, civic engagement is a *cause*, and public knowledge is an *outcome*. Both of the following models are important.

1. **Information** developed and used by citizens creates **Public Knowledge**, which supports effective **Civic Engagement**
2. **Civic Engagement** influences **Policies** and **Institutions**, which create or protect **Information** and **Knowledge**

Exhibit 3. The Cycle of Civic Engagement



In this section, I concentrate on the second model. Such policies as the funding of public media, information networks, archives, libraries, and other facilities; freedom of information, freedom of speech, copyright, and other intellectual property rights; and transparency of government, and industry—all these matter

for the quality, relevance, and distribution of knowledge. Most of these issues are controversial, and I will not argue in this paper for particular policies. For our purposes here, the key point is that communications policies in the public and private sectors are important and they are matters of debate, contention, and pressure.

Active citizens must be involved in the debate and must exercise influence. By “citizens,” I mean all members of the community—not just experts, organized interests, and stakeholders. By “citizens,” I also mean something different from “consumers.” Individuals in their role as citizens approach issues of public policy with at least some concern for the polity; in their role as consumers, people tend to make decisions based on what is most desirable or convenient for themselves. Discussions, surveys, and political processes can be designed to elicit responses from people as consumers or as citizens (Elster, 1986). For example, people make different choices when they are asked to discuss an issue in public, give reasons, and then vote, than when they are given individual choices to make in a marketplace.

It is crucial that people discuss and act on media and communications policy in ways that elicit their thinking as citizens. After all, producing reliable and relevant public information and informative discussions of public issues are fraught with potential market failures. There may, for example, be inadequate incentives to produce and distribute worthwhile public information, unless the government subsidizes such efforts. Firms that do produce valuable information and discussion may charge fees or erect barriers that are incompatible with democratic values. As citizens, people must constantly evaluate the supply and availability of information and knowledge, and advocate appropriate reforms.

Once civic knowledge has been created, it must be protected against a wide range of threats, from malicious behavior to sheer neglect. Traditional forms of knowledge, such as the documents in a town archive, the reporting that filled a traditional town newspaper, and the artifacts in a local museum, all took money and training to catalog, manage, and conserve. Modern digital media also requires archiving, maintenance, and conservation. Digital conversations require moderation and protections against spammers, flammers, and viruses.

The overall risk is that policies will be decided by interest-group pressure and negotiation with minimal concern for public interests. To be sure, there is no consensus about what the “public interest” requires: libertarians, social conservatives, egalitarians, and others will (and should) disagree. But there should be a robust debate about the public interest in which citizens offer diverse arguments and principles that influence public policy. Policy should not simply satisfy powerful and self-interested stakeholders.

Once again, voluntary associations play an essential role. They recruit, educate, and motivate people to act as citizens. To ensure that the public interest is debated and the debate influences public policy, we need voluntary associations that perform the following functions:

Advocacy. Beneficial policies are public goods that often lose out to private interests that profit more tangibly from selfish policies. Thus we need independent, nonprofit associations that have incentives to recruit voters, activists, and donors to promote the public interest in relation to knowledge and information. The American Library Association, for example, has been a strong advocate for fair use and public access to knowledge.

Alliances. Communities across the country have information needs and valuable, accumulated public knowledge. Attacks on free information anywhere are threats to free information everywhere. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” That is what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote as he and his colleagues built a civil rights movement. As a result of their work, when civil rights were viciously repressed in one location, people got on buses from other places to come and protest. We may not need bus trips, but we do need people in each community to feel that the information needs of other places matter to them as well. In practical terms, that requires networks of associations that have working ties.

Education, broadly defined. People do not automatically acquire an understanding and appreciation of valuable civic knowledge, nor the skills necessary to produce and conserve such knowledge. Each generation must transmit to the next the skills, motivations, and understanding necessary to create and preserve public knowledge. Not only public schools but also private, nonprofit associations must play roles in this process. Associations must recruit and train the next generation of community historians, archivists, naturalists, artists, and documentary filmmakers (among other roles).

Who Should Do What

One way to summarize the recommendations of this white paper is to identify the actions that have been proposed for various institutions.

Congress and Federal Agencies

The Corporation for National and Community Service, with congressional authorization and appropriations, should create a Civic Information Corps that provides training, grants, and meetings for service organizations that emphasize the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Participants should include non-college-bound youth and young adults. The Corporation should also designate learning outcomes for all of its programs, and those outcomes should include civic communications skills.

Agencies that fund research and scholarship (National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and

National Endowment for the Arts, among others), should fund and evaluate scholarship that benefits local communities as well as efforts to aggregate and disseminate such scholarship.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and other federal agencies that address community-level problems should support communitywide public deliberations about those problems. Hampton's infrastructure for civic engagement and deliberation was seeded with a federal grant. EPA has supported community collaborations to address environmental problems with grants, toolkits, meetings, training, and technical assistance through a program called Community Action for a Renewed Environment (CARE) (Sirianni, 2009, pp. 270-274). These are rare models in a system that still favors command-and-control regulation. To promote civic engagement, a mix of grants and other incentives, plus training and technical assistance, seems essential.

The federal civil service should provide opportunities and incentives (e.g., credit courses) for government employees to learn how to collaborate with citizens to create and disseminate public knowledge.

State and Local Governments

Cities, counties, and other jurisdictions should provide physical spaces for public deliberation. These need not be single-purposes sites; convention centers, central libraries, and other multipurpose facilities can be designed to work for public meetings.

Local governments should fund and recognize or promote online knowledge hubs, often in partnerships with local colleges and universities.

Local governments should convene deliberative forums to address public issues and should promote ongoing training for deliberative democracy.

School systems should make civic education a priority and include within civic education media and communication skills and service-learning opportunities that involve media.

Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities should reward high-quality, rigorous research that is helpful to their immediate geographical communities. They should create websites that aggregate such research and make it publicly accessible. They should create oversight boards with community representation that review community-based research to ensure that it is genuinely valuable.

Journalism schools and departments should play leading roles in creating and maintaining public information portals, and their classes should work on those projects as a form of service-learning. Programs in library and information sci-

ence have important roles in designing, maintaining, and evaluating public online archives, networks, and relationship maps. Extension agents should help maintain and disseminate public information.

Colleges and universities should make civic learning opportunities (including courses and less formal learning opportunities) available to non-students. They should also strive to improve K–12 civic education and media literacy through relevant research and teacher training.

Foundations

Foundations should generally fund the work described above, with special attention to funding community-based nonprofits that serve marginalized populations, of which an important example is non-college-bound youth and young adults. Funds should be available for knowledge creation and dissemination, e.g., community-based research projects, trainings, and access to computers. Foundations can also fund *processes*, such as public deliberations at the local level.

The most important role of philanthropy is to support pilot projects, such as exemplary colleges and universities that (in partnership with community organizations) build experimental online knowledge portals. Once pilot projects are successful, governments and higher education should take them to scale.

Citizens

Citizens should seek opportunities to create and share public knowledge and discuss public issues. They should learn to do so in formal and informal educational settings. They should expect governments to be open, transparent, and collaborative and demand reform when they are not. They should volunteer to the best of their ability, and their volunteering should include elements of research, media creation, and communications. In their regular paid work, they should also look for opportunities to contribute to public knowledge. Citizens should, in particular, create and share knowledge about the networks and relationships in their communities.

Relationship to the Knight Commission Report

In the preceding paper, I have recommended the steps that I consider most important and that I feel most qualified to discuss. I have omitted other promising strategies, such as working with community foundations and changing federal policies, because I am less informed about them. Overall, I have offered five strategies that are connected to, but not perfectly in line with, the civic engagement recommendations (11–15) of the Knight Commission report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*. The following chart is intended to show how they relate.

| Proposed Strategies | Knight Commission Recommendations | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| | 11. Reflect entire diversity of communities | 12. Engage young people | 13. Community summits | 14. Enhance public spaces for deliberation |
| 1. Civic Information Corps | Because the Corps would recruit non-college-track youth, it would be diverse. It would also produce culturally diverse content. | The Corps would enlist young people. | The Corps could help organize such summits. | The Corps could manage a hub in each community, providing individuals with formal roles as webmaster, content editor, outreach coordinator, etc. |
| 2. Universities as information hubs | Universities must not only educate their own students but form genuine partnerships with communities. | University students are predominantly young. Higher ed also has a role in enhancing K-12 civic education. | Universities can be the sites for such summits, and their faculty, staff and students can support them. | Websites that aggregate universities' research on local issues would be hubs. |
| 3. Invest in deliberation | Discussions are not equitable or diverse unless investments are made in training, moderation, and recruitment. | The best examples include separate pathways for young people to enter deliberation. | Summits would be the apex of a deliberative culture. | The online hubs should promote discussion. |
| 4. Generate public "relational" knowledge | By displaying the network structure of communities, we make it possible to identify excluded groups and address inequitable power relationships. | High school students have been engaged in creating such knowledge, with educational benefits. | Understanding the community's network structure would help prepare for a representative summit. | The hubs should present relationships as well as data and opinions. |
| 5. Organize to defend the knowledge commons | The tragedy of the knowledge commons most seriously affects marginalized people, who have the biggest stake in defending free and high-quality information. | Part of an adequate defense is educating the next generation to value public knowledge. We can also tap their enthusiasm for digital culture. | Policies related to information are appropriate topics for deliberation. | A hub supported by a university would benefit from its resources, including its legal and political power. |

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APPENDIX



About the Author

Peter Levine (<http://peterlevine.ws>) is director of CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and research director of Tufts University's Jonathan Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. Levine graduated from Yale in 1989 with a degree in philosophy. He studied philosophy at Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, receiving his doctorate in 1992. From 1991 until 1993, he was a research associate at Common Cause. In the late 1990s, he was deputy director of the National Commission on Civic Renewal.

Levine is the author of *Reforming the Humanities: Literature and Ethics from Dante through Modern Times* (2009), *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens* (2007), three other scholarly books on philosophy and politics, and a novel. He also co-edited *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (2006) with John Gastil and *Engaging Young People in Civic Life* (2009) with Jim Youniss and co-organized the writing of *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a report released by Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE in 2003 (<http://civic-missionofschools.org>).

He has served on the boards or steering committees of AmericaSpeaks, Street Law, the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the Kettering Foundation, the American Bar Association Committee's for Public Education, the Paul J. Aicher Foundation, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

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The Program's executive director is Charles M. Firestone, who has served in that capacity since 1989, and has also served as executive vice president of the Aspen Institute. He is a communications attorney and law professor, formerly director of the UCLA Communications Law Program, first president of the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners, and an appellate attorney for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.