

## **Informing Ohio Communities**

A Symposium on *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*,  
the Report of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy  
Friday, November 20, 2009  
The Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio

### **Remarks of Peter M. Shane**

I'd like to start by thanking Harvey Graff for creating this opportunity to think through the implications of the Knight Commission for information and democracy right here in my home town. The timing could not be better. For instance, the recent Ohio casino referendum sets the stage for a perfect example of how government — both at the state and local levels — will be making crucial decisions in the months ahead that will affect the quality of life for a major American city. Will the citizens who stand to be affected by those decisions know what is at stake, who is making those decisions and what effect they might have on their neighborhoods? This is the connection between information and democracy.

But, before specifically introducing the work of the Knight Commission, I'd like to provoke you with a question. This is supposed to be the age of multi-tasking, so I am hoping you can listen, with one part of your brain, to a brief history of the Commission and to a summary of its conclusions, and ask another part of your brain to contemplate the following.

What would it be like to organize an entire college or university education around the idea of journalism? I am not talking here about what we think of as vocational journalism education. The idea is not to make everyone a professional editor or reporter. I am talking, instead, about conceiving an entire program of liberal education that takes as its central theme the idea that the new media phenomenon is potentially making everyone a journalist. Thus, for both students and faculty, it is critical to be able to analyze media products and to have the skills

to help meet the challenge of arriving at “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account[s]” of a day’s local community events “in a context which gives them meaning.” (I am borrowing here the definition of news from the 1947 Hutchins Commission.) What would such an educational program look like?

We could imagine freshman writing courses devoted to some combination of news literacy and training in reportage. Students would have to learn something about who makes what decisions for the local community and what rights and capacities everyday citizens have to obtain information. They would have to learn about how to make technical matters accessible for a general audience. They would have to learn to evaluate information sources. Some might go on to be the campus equivalent of professional journalists, working for a student paper, radio station, or television outlet. Others might become bloggers or just better online commenters on the blogs of others. Perhaps some would form expert networks that would check on the accuracy of stories in mainstream media or offer their services in vetting professionally produced stories within their areas of expertise. Is something like this imaginable? Maybe even in, say, a state capital, where there would be lots and lots of government stories to tell at local, state and regional levels of decision making? Indeed, if I am on to something here, might Ohio State not be the perfect place to launch this educational vision?

Please let that question now reside for a moment in the part of your brain you do not need in order to listen to my explanation of the Knight Commission.

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy was organized in 2008 “to recommend policy reforms and other public initiatives to help American communities better meet their information needs.” The idea for such an initiative hatched at a 2007 summer program called the Forum on Communications and Society, which is sponsored

annually by the Communications and Society Program of the Aspen Institute, a Washington think tank. I was not present for the occasion, but I take it that what prompted the idea was a combination of anxiety about the economic crises facing mainstream media and a conviction that new technologies were simultaneously creating new opportunities for public information and new challenges in terms of understanding the roles, responsibilities, and ethics of journalists. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation agreed to fund the initiative, enabling the Aspen Institute to recruit an exceptionally diverse Commission of thoughtful leaders from the worlds of media, public policy, and community development. They were tasked with figuring out: What are the information needs of communities in a democracy? Are they being met in the United States? If not, what can be done about it?

I was fortunate to be asked to work as a consultant to the Aspen Institute and to serve as executive director for the Commission. It apparently helped that I was not a conventional “media person,” because the Knight Foundation did not want the Commission’s inquiry job to be seen as “how to save the local newspaper” or some such thing. What I brought to the table was my research background in government’s use of new media to involve the public more directly in actual policy making, and my administrative experience in organizing substantial interdisciplinary projects. My job until about a month ago was to direct the Commission’s research, program the Commission’s meetings and community forums, and serve as lead drafter of what became the Commission’s final report, *INFORMING COMMUNITIES: SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE*. (Of course, I was part of a sizeable team in implementing these tasks, but I should give special mention to our project manager, Erin Silliman, who is herself a native of Columbus, Ohio.)

There are three things I found especially exciting about the Commission and the direction of its thinking. First, the Commission was asked to look at information needs through the eyes of the individual citizen, not through the lens of any media or other institution. Its product is thus not a nostalgic report about “saving” or “preserving.” It’s an analysis of what citizens and communities need in the digital age, and the Commission’s recommendations proceed with those needs taken as paramount.

Second, the report focuses on geographically defined local communities. People often use the word "community" in a non-geographic sense to describe any network of information and support with which people identify. Buckeye Nation is an obvious example. But our democracy is organized along geographic lines. Where we live still determines much of our quality of life and the resources over which we share authority with our fellow citizens. Inadequacies in information systems related to the communities in which we live, work and vote can undermine real democracy and the social and economic welfare of our communities.

Finally, the report pulls together three discussions that frequently occur only separately. These are discussions about maximizing the availability of reliable news and information, achieving universal access to significant information technologies and the skills necessary to use them effectively, and promoting public engagement among everyday citizens, both with information and with each other. The Commission regards these three discussions as targeting the three key objectives – information, capacity, and engagement – that communities need to pursue in order to thrive in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The report goes on to make 15 general recommendations, five in each of these three areas. And, for an appendix, I prepared a menu of specific actions that the Commission might expect various actors to take if people took ownership of the Commission’s analysis and tried to build the future it points to.

Of course, the role of journalism was very much of concern to the Commissioners. The Report states the obvious truth that healthy community information flow depends in part on intermediaries. As the report states, “No individual” by himself or herself “can generate all the analysis, debate, context and interpretation necessary to turn raw information into useful knowledge.” In other words, everyone needs help to engage with information, and “effective intermediaries” are especially “critical in gathering and disseminating news.” Increasing government transparency does not change this conclusion. When I recently described to a Columbus city employee everything the Federal Communications Commission is doing to make its operations more transparent, she said: “Great. Now there will be yet more mountains of information I cannot possibly digest by myself.” Everyone needs intermediaries.

In the view of the Commission, a critical intermediary shortage for America’s communities is that there is just not enough local journalism – period. I quote:

Journalistic institutions do not need saving so much as they need creating. The 2007 Newspaper Association of America count of daily newspapers in the United States was 1,422. At the same time, there are 3,248 counties, encompassing over 19,000 incorporated places and over 30,000 “minor civil divisions” having legal status, such as towns and villages. It follows that hundreds, if not thousands of American communities receive only scant journalistic attention on a daily basis, and many have none. Even accounting for community weeklies— a 2004 survey identified 6,704 such papers nationwide—it is likely that many American communities get no attention from print journalism at all.

The key thought here is that we need not just to preserve journalism where it exists; we need to create it where it does not. This is all the more important because, without some remedial action, there is going to be less and less local news in the years ahead as newspapers cut staff, which seems inevitable as things are going.

This brings me to a theme that I would like to emphasize this morning. And, at this point, I need to emphasize that I am now speaking only for myself. As lead drafter of *Informing*

*Communities*, my task was to find a way of articulating a framework at the center of gravity of 17 people's very different outlooks and approaches. Here, I have the luxury – or embarrassment – of voicing an idea that appears in the report, but which I want to state more categorically and more emphatically than was the position of the Commission as a whole.

The point is this. ***Private markets for general local news or for access to readers of general local news will never generate sufficient resources to do the things that communities need journalism to do.*** The production of local news has always depended on some form of subsidy, and markets without subsidies will not produce enough journalism to keep people informed on public issues. We will certainly not have enough investigating and exposing corruption and neglect by the powerful.

This is, I think, an inexorable economic truth. Potential providers of general news will always underinvest in the production of general local news because local news has positive externalities that no one provider can hope to capture. What I mean by a “positive externality” is something that is good for the community, but not something that works so clearly to any one person's benefit that they would pay for it. Producing less corrupt government is a positive externality.

Relatedly, potential providers of general news will underinvest because local news is a “nonrivalrous” good. You cannot exclude people from its benefits, so it suffers from a free rider problem. The story is widely told among journalists of a college student explaining why she does not buy the newspaper. “If news is important,” she said, “it will find me.” How much is a business going to invest to make that college student a happy customer?

Finally, potential buyers of news will underinvest because a lot of important news is news that people actually do not want. Even people who purport to be interested in news do not

want to pay for news they find discomfiting or at odds with the way they'd like to see the world. And, in this economic context, publicly traded corporations are especially ill-positioned to be adequate news providers. The logic of pleasing shareholders has little to do with the logic of serving communities.

Of course, this is not to deny the flowering of many local experiments that are doing good work based on combining support from advertising, individual philanthropists, foundations, corporate sponsorships, and citizen "members," but I wonder both about their staying power (especially in smaller communities) and their scope. I am thus especially interested in the prospects for other anchor institutions in local communities to provide ongoing social support for the gathering and dissemination of local news. I am looking for the kind of resource stability that will support what two noted authors have described as not just "information, but . . . news judgment oriented to a public agenda and a general audience."

And that brings me back to the question with which I started. What would it mean to build the theory and practice of journalism into the very DNA of American higher education? How would it affect communities to see a flowering of news outlets grounded in local universities, colleges, and community colleges?

For starters, it seems to me that journalism-centered liberal arts education would respond simultaneously to three major social problems. One is the shortfall in local news production around the country. The second is the well-documented deficiency in college student writing. The third is the low level of Americans' civic literacy, their knowledge about how social institutions work and who makes the policy decisions that affect their lives.

Involving students in local journalism also wins what I like to think of as the educational trifecta. The issues posed are intellectually challenging. Students like dealing with them. The

skills students develop increase their marketability and enable them to function more effectively as citizens.

An excellent recent study prepared by famed journalist and editor (and OSU alum) Len Downie and the noted sociologist of journalism, Michael Schudson, reports on a variety of exciting models for connecting journalism to higher education. As they report in, “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” KQED in San Francisco is partnering next year with the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley to launch an independent nonprofit Bay area news organization. According to Downie and Schudson, “The new entity’s reporters, working with KQED journalists and Berkeley students, will cover local government, education, culture, the environment and neighborhoods for its own Web site, other digital media, and public radio and television.”

Along similar lines, several newspapers in southern Florida have agreed to use reporting from journalism students at Florida International University. The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University in Phoenix operates a service provides student reporting to about thirty client newspapers and television stations around Arizona. Both Berkeley’s and Columbia’s journalism schools operate a range of online news sites that feature reporting by its students in city or outlying neighborhoods.

Universities are even becoming homes for independent nonprofit investigative reporting projects started by former newspaper and television journalists, at such places as San Diego State, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Northeastern, and Boston University. As a law professor, I have especially admired Northwestern University, where journalism students are working with the Innocence Project to investigate death penalty convictions. They are obviously doing important work because the Cook County prosecutor has already subpoenaed the students.

My point is not that universities are the single, exclusive, or even best answer to satisfying the daily news and information needs of local communities, but unless there are nonprofit social institutions of significant heft shouldering a lot of this burden, things will get worse. And it's not just student journalists who can help. Business schools can help teach marketing to online entrepreneurs. Law schools can help local media outlets to pursue Freedom of Information requests and defend against libel suits. This is not just the business of big research universities either. Although I may be giving in to stereotype, it may be that, in covering union news or news of relevance to new immigrant communities, our community colleges may have a strong comparative advantage. Indeed, if you let your imagination roam here a bit, you can envision a consortium of higher education institutions in a local area combining talents and resources to provide a wide range of local information in the public interest.

The Knight Commission was impressed, as am I, by the wondrous range of new technological tools that are enabling more and more people to be creators, shapers, and distributors of information than ever before. We do live in a renaissance moment. But tools are only tools. They can be turned to democratic advantage only with skill and by design. Right now, the technology-fueled information revolution is not serving all Americans equally well, and our local communities are in need of help. The Knight Commission urges Americans to “embrace the quality of community information flow as an issue worthy of their concern and involvement.” My plea is to universities to take this cause seriously.