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# Assessing Community INFORMATION NEEDS

A Practical Guide

**A WHITE PAPER** BY RICHARD C. HARWOOD

  
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
*Communications and Society Program*

 Knight Foundation

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

# Assessing Community Information Needs

## A Practical Guide

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

written by  
Richard C. Harwood



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](http://www.knightcomm.org) or by using Twitter hashtag #knightcomm.

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*For more information, contact:*

**The Aspen Institute  
Communications and Society Program**

One Dupont Circle, NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Phone: (202) 736-5818  
Fax: (202) 467-0790  
[www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s)

*To purchase additional copies of this paper, please contact:*

The Aspen Institute  
Publications Office  
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109 Houghton Lab Lane  
Queenstown, MD 21658  
Phone: (410) 820-5326  
Fax: (410) 827-9174

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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 Community Information Needs

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.



# Assessing Community Information Needs: A Practical Guide

## *Executive Summary*

At the heart of this paper sits a simple guiding principle: The key to building what the Knight Commission calls a community’s “healthy information environment” requires taking steps that are relevant and meaningful to the people who make that community home—that enable people to become informed, engage with one another, address the issues they care about and create the community they want. But not just any information will do.

Meeting this challenge will require a fundamental shift in how people’s information needs are approached. Simply replicating or aggregating existing ideas and tools, or instituting new programs and initiatives alone, will not necessarily produce new and useful knowledge for communities. Nor will merely adding to the wide array of RSS feeds, blogs, recommendation filters, online rating tools and social bookmarking sites.

In reality, most change in communities occurs through pockets of activity that emerge and take root over time. These pockets result from individuals, small groups, and various organizations seeing an opportunity for change and seizing it, often through trial and error. Seldom are the collection of such pockets orchestrated through a top-down, linear plan; instead, they happen when people and groups start to engage and interact. In this way, different groups at different times play a crucial catalytic and connecting role—helping to foster the conditions for people to tap their own potential and join together to forge a way forward.

The point for those seeking to gauge and grow a community’s information environment is not to see or create a single information destination, but to allow for many and varied touch-points for people who are stepping into and making their way through community and public life. It is important not to try and own the space, control the flow of information, or dictate change, but to generate multiple information sources in the community.

This paper is a practical guide for individuals and groups to assess and build a healthy community information environment. The paper lays out four important guideposts in moving forward:

1. Those seeking to assess and build a strong information environment must turn outward toward their community.
2. Progress in building a robust information environment will come best and fastest by using a specific issue to focus a community’s efforts.

3. Emphasis should be placed on how knowledge is generated in a community and on its quality and flow, not solely on counting and increasing the sources and volume of information.
4. Taking effective action requires innovation, not simply good planning.

Along with these guideposts are nine strategies for a community to assess and build a healthy information environment:

- Strategy 1: Create an authentic steering committee
- Strategy 2: Define “community”
- Strategy 3: Engage the community early on
- Strategy 4: Mobilize the community as a resource
- Strategy 5: Create a discipline of making sense of what you are learning
- Strategy 6: Make clear choices about what actions to take
- Strategy 7: Actively cultivate boundary-spanning organizations and groups
- Strategy 8: Tell the community’s story of change
- Strategy 9: Ensure enough entry points for people to engage

The ideas and strategies in this paper can be used with any specific set of tools a community uses to assess and build its information environment, including the Community Information Toolkit created by the Knight Foundation and Monitor Group.

When reading this paper, it is important to remember that all across America people yearn to re-engage and reconnect with one another, to be part of something larger than themselves, and to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. But they often lack the vital information and practical means by which to come together to act on what matters most to them. The result is that many people and communities find themselves stymied or not moving fast enough to meet the pressing challenges before them—from public schools to public health to safe streets.

It is within this context that we must meet the information needs of communities.

**ASSESSING COMMUNITY INFORMATION  
NEEDS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE**

*Richard C. Harwood*



## Assessing Community Information Needs: A Practical Guide

*Information is as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools and public health.*

— Knight Commission, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*

### The Knight Commission's Call to Action

Imagine you are flying into Detroit. From above you see numerous school buildings, miles of roads crisscrossing different neighborhoods, a landscape dotted by television and radio station antennae, and houses—lots of them. Already, from the air, you are planning for the kind of information environment this community needs.

But once on the ground, as you make your way through the community, you find that many of the schools have been shuttered, there are countless abandoned homes, and the population is shrinking. From above, the community's vastness might suggest an information environment of a certain size and scope, but on-the-ground reality suggests something else entirely. Exactly what kind of information environment would be required for this *new* Detroit?

It is one thing to focus on the “built” elements of a community's information environment; it is another to focus on various programs or initiatives one might want to start to better inform and engage people; and it is still another to place people, their aspirations, and how they live their daily lives at the center of planning and action. The key is to build a community information environment that enables people to act on the real, everyday challenges they face, to connect with one another, and to reach for their individual and shared aspirations.

All across America, people yearn to re-engage and reconnect with one another, to be part of something larger than themselves, and to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. But often they lack the information and practical means by which to come together to act on what matters most to them.

The result is that many people and communities find themselves stymied or not moving fast enough to meet the pressing challenges before them—from public

schools to public health to safe streets. It is within this context that the information needs of communities must be met.

In response to these realities, the Knight Commission spent more than a year examining the information needs of communities and laid out a bold vision for the future in its report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*:

With multiple tools of communication, dynamic institutions for promoting knowledge and the exchange of ideas, and renewed commitment to engage in public life, Americans could find themselves in a brilliant new age. People would enjoy unprecedented capacity to fulfill their individual aspirations and to collectively shape the future of their communities. Community discussion, collaboration and accountable public decision making could make life better in every neighborhood, town and city.

The Commission offered a series of recommendations to help communities find their way forward, including the need for communities to assess and strengthen their local information environment. In Appendix I—Taking Stock: Are You a Healthy Information Community?—the Commission lays out eight elements of a healthy information environment:

1. A majority of government information and services online, accessible through a central and easy-to-use portal
2. A local government with a committed policy on transparency
3. Quality journalism through local newspapers, local television and radio stations, and online sources
4. Citizens with effective opportunities to have their voices heard and to affect public policy
5. A vibrant public library, or other public center for information that provides digital resources and professional assistance
6. Ready access to information that enhances quality of life, including information provided by trusted intermediary organizations in the community on a variety of subjects
7. Local schools with computer and high-speed Internet access, as well as curricula that support digital and media literacy
8. High-speed Internet available to all citizens

Building from these eight elements, the Knight Foundation together with Monitor Group produced the Community Information Toolkit ([www.infotoolkit.org](http://www.infotoolkit.org)) for communities to assess the health of their information environment. The toolkit consists of four main components:

- A process by which communities can identify a set of local issues and brainstorm the ways information can be used to address these issues
- Methods for assessing a community's information environment
- A scorecard for analyzing and making sense of the data collected about the community's information environment
- An action planning tool to enable communities to take action to strengthen their information environment

This paper is a practical guide for individuals and groups to assess and build a healthy community information environment. The paper focuses on a simple guiding principle: The steps one takes to create a healthy information environment must be *relevant* to what matters most to people in the community, enable people to engage in the public life of their community and create the conditions for people to engage with one another.

Each community will need to move ahead in ways that reflect its local context. Lew Friedland, professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a leading innovator on meeting the information needs of communities, writes in his Field Notes:

The challenge of building a strong community information infrastructure varies considerably with the kind of community. Some communities are well resourced economically or civically. In others there are stark inequalities of both economic and social capital. Some communities have the civic infrastructure that allows people of different races, incomes and neighborhoods to talk about civic issues and problems across multiple and often complicated boundaries; others do not.

Friedland's reminder raises another implication that this paper addresses: The mere existence of certain structural or institutional components does not ensure an informed and engaged community. Such components must have the right qualities and conditions if they are to be relevant and meaningful to people.

## Creating the *Right* Information Environment

As I write this paper, the Harwood Institute is partnering with the United Way of Santa Fe County, where one of its signature efforts has focused on the academic achievement of vulnerable children at the former Kaune Elementary School. There, the local United Way has sought not only to strengthen the elementary school, but to develop new afterschool programs and mobilize neighborhood residents in the hope of supporting all kids so they can succeed. Driving this effort is the underlying belief that it is the community itself that must play a central role in educating and supporting all children.

For the first year of work, the Santa Fe team and their local partners put into place new efforts that enabled school officials, parents, neighbors and kids at Kaune to meet and work together, build new relationships and trust, and discover that they hold much more in common than that which divides them.

But then the city of Santa Fe, like many other communities across the country, faced deep budget shortfalls, which in turn led to a number of school closings, including Kaune. The school was forced to merge with two other schools from adjacent neighborhoods and, together, these three neighborhoods now feed into the new Aspen Community Magnet School.

With the merger came a question: How informed and engaged were people who lived in the new, combined areas, and what kind of information environment was needed to create the necessary trust, connections, and the capability to improve the academic achievement of Aspen's students?

From one perspective, if you were to go to Santa Fe and visit these three neighborhoods, you would find abundant information sources, good access to school-related data, healthy journalism coverage of the area, and places for people to come and have their voices heard—all essential elements identified by the Knight Commission as part of a rich information environment.

In other words, at first look, the new Aspen area appears to have everything in place to be informed and engaged.

And yet when the United Way of Santa Fe County team sat down with parents and residents, they learned that the reality in people's lives was quite different. In listening to people, they discovered just how disconnected people in the three surrounding neighborhoods felt from the school *and* from one another; how little information actually flowed between and among people; and how this new, combined school area lacked a sense of cohesion, interaction and trust.

The Santa Fe United Way came to realize that while the pieces of a strong information environment were there, the right conditions were not. Their conclusion: If the community was to have any chance to move the needle on academic achievement for children, then efforts would need to be undertaken to build up the local information environment to help foster stronger ties among people and to provide better information flows within and across the three neighborhoods.

## Moving Ahead in Santa Fe: Two Scenarios

While the work in Santa Fe continues, it is too early to know how the story will play out. But it is possible to imagine two different scenarios for what could occur there. In reading these two scenarios, consider the extent to which these activities are likely to create a more informed and engaged community that is able to help strengthen the academic achievement of all children.

**Scenario One.** Here are the actions taken in this scenario:

- Publicize on community bulletin boards and e-mail lists the merger of the three former schools to build awareness of the new Aspen school.
- Invite parents to tour the new school.
- Disseminate a new “fact sheet” about Aspen to parents and others in the neighborhood that highlights the number of students who attend the school, the number of school classrooms and computers, and the demographic make-up of students and their families.
- Create a new online platform for parents to track student homework, grades and get in touch with teachers.
- Hold a school “town hall” for the principal to tell parents about the school.
- Start a new Twitter account to keep parents informed throughout each day about important school happenings, upcoming events and opportunities for them at the school.
- Launch a new parent association so parents can develop ways to support the school, such as buying needed supplies for underfunded art classes and athletic teams.

In Scenario One, a clear effort is being made to reach out and inform parents about the new school and the three neighborhoods and to keep parents abreast of school activities. But when one examines these activities, by-and-large, they (1) are targeted primarily at increasing the volume and dissemination of information from the school *to* parents, (2) envision parents as passive recipients of information and (3) fail to inform and engage the larger community surrounding the school.

**Scenario Two.** Scenario Two begins from an entirely different perspective. In this scenario, the Santa Fe team and its partners decide first to hold a series of community conversations across the three neighborhoods with parents, students, and other residents. The community conversations start by identifying people’s shared aspirations for their community and Aspen as well as their concerns and other issues.

Through the conversations, the team learns that people want to create “a safe, caring and connected community,” and they hold four specific concerns in relation to meeting this aspiration:

- “Safety” *within* the school—people are concerned with bullying and want to make sure students feel comfortable and safe in expressing their views in an increasingly culturally diverse school
- “Safety” *outside* of the school—people want to ensure that kids can make their way safely between school and home
- Parental skills—many parents feel they lack the skills (language, math, reading, computer, and other skills) to help kids do their homework and achieve academically
- Community connectedness—people have little experience with each other; in fact, there is widespread mistrust within and across some of the neighborhoods, which prevents people from being able to work together to support all kids, including their own

Based on this knowledge, the Santa Fe team, school officials and members of the community decide together to launch the new endeavors listed below. Notice how these actions expressly address people’s aspirations and concerns, and how they serve to produce new flows of information between and among people (not just from the school to parents) so that people can become more informed, more engaged and more involved in creating the kind of community and school they want.

Here are the actions taken in this scenario:

- Create anti-bullying program at Aspen that involves kids and parents learning new mediation skills. Information is sent home to parents through the kids, via e-mail lists and postings on community bulletin boards, in neighborhood stores, and through local churches.
- Identify classroom parent representatives to build stronger relationships between and among parents in each classroom, and to facilitate parents being involved in class with children and in group activities outside the school.

- Launch an afterschool program to give kids a safe place to go after school and provide tutors to help them develop homework skills.
- Develop computer literacy and English as a Second Language programs for parents so they can develop new skills to support their kids in school and through which they can develop relationships and build trust with other parents and local residents.
- Nurture community gardens to bring kids and adults together to build new relationships within the neighborhoods and to knit together a network of people watching out for kids.
- Create a new parent association for the school that focuses on building relationships between and among parents, and connecting parents to the activities listed here, thereby strengthening neighborhood networks, the flows of information, and levels of trust.
- Engage teachers at Aspen to forge stronger relationships with parents and the larger community and to identify how, together, they can meet the learning styles and academic needs of each child.
- Start a new series of in-person discussions among residents in the neighborhoods about their aspirations for the community, the role education needs to play in achieving those aspirations and further actions the community can take to support their common vision.

In this second scenario, the information and its flows would enable people to learn more and do more individually and with others in the community. The activities facilitate people coming together in different places, for varied but connected purposes, and in a host of different combinations of parents, teachers, students and community members. What's more, the flow of information is never in one direction, but ripples out in a multitude of directions. No one source is *the* source. In fact, the credibility of much of the information comes from the fact that the community itself is generating it—people themselves are the sources of knowledge.

In Scenario Two, the community is creating new kinds of information, new structures to produce and spread information, and new flows between and among different groups of people. The result is that people's aspirations, concerns and capacities are being tapped to learn about and act on what matters most to them.

### The Importance of Public Knowledge

In thinking about creating informed and engaged communities, it is important to have both expert *and* public knowledge. This is an important theme that runs throughout this paper. Expert knowledge often comes in the form of data, statistics, and policy analysis, framed through a professional lens. Such knowledge is essential for making informed choices and decisions in public life.

Often when I talk with people about making “information” available within communities, they start by reciting the expert knowledge they have—including exhaustive lists of data, trend analysis, and issue-based reports they want to gather and post online. In other conversations, I’ll hear about single-issue groups that want to serve up highly-specific, sometimes highly-selective information on their particular issue. And then there are the countless advocacy groups that put forth reams of information, with the sole purpose to advance their own causes and rally supporters and donors.

Public knowledge, in contrast, consists of people’s aspirations, what matters most to them in their lives and the community in which they live, and the choices and trade-offs they are willing to make to create the kind of community they want. Public knowledge is generated by the community itself, it comes from people and their interactions with one another. Too often in communities, expert knowledge is seen as a substitute for, or crowds out, public knowledge.

Based on more than 20 years of research, the Harwood Institute has developed a clear framework around public knowledge. The 7 Public Knowledge Keys, when taken together, help people see a broader and deeper picture of their communities and the people who live there. These knowledge keys include:

- Issues of Concern—the issues, tensions and values people are wrestling with
- Aspirations—the aspirations people hold for their community and future
- Sense of Place—including its history and evolution
- Sources—the sources of knowledge and engagement people trust most
- People—the things people hold valuable to themselves and the community, and the language and norms that shape their lives and interactions
- Civic Places—the places where people get together and engage (offline and online)
- Stereotypes—the stereotypes or preconceived notions people bring with them about the community/topic they are exploring

One of the central tasks in creating informed and engaged communities is to ensure that there is a healthy mix of expert and public knowledge generated and used by the community. Only then can people see and hear themselves reflected in community life, and only then will they want to step forward and engage.

## Key Guideposts

In thinking about Santa Fe, Detroit and many other communities, there are four guideposts that can help develop efforts to assess and build a community's healthy information environment.

Before laying out these guideposts, it is worth considering the context in which this work unfolds. Embedded in many civic endeavors is an assumption that communities are static entities to be managed, orchestrated and controlled. There can be the belief that if only a community does the right research, adopts various best practices and builds "things," then the work is complete and it is time to move onto the next challenge.

But, like all environments, a community's information environment is organic, shaped by constant interaction of various elements, people and conditions, and forever changing.

My work with major newspapers over the years helps to illustrate this point. As various newspapers sought to become better connected and more relevant to their communities, a host of individual newspapers made impressive progress. But, by now, we all know the story of newspapers and their diminished role in society. They could not overcome the emerging forces of the marketplace, the game-changing Internet, and the collapse of their business model. It was in part the fall-out from this very story that prompted the Aspen Institute and the Knight Foundation to wisely take on the cause of the information needs of communities.

Simply making new and more sophisticated plans, or building new structures, clearly was not enough to reinvigorate these media outlets. It would not be enough in Santa Fe or Detroit, either. Nor will it be the case for other organizations and groups concerned with the civic health of communities, including public radio and television stations, local United Ways, community foundations and public libraries, among others.

My experience with these and other groups has led me to identify four guideposts for communities that seek to assess and build information environments that enable people to learn about, engage in, and act on those things that matter most to them:

1. *Those seeking to assess and build a strong information environment must turn outward toward their community.* Taking actions that are relevant to the community requires a certain orientation, a posture, a stance—and it is one of being *turned outward* toward the people who live there. Otherwise, one's activities may be too narrowly focused on implementing a specific process or program that may sound good but does not actually meet the community where it is. This was part of the problem in Scenario One regarding Santa Fe; while many of those activities may be helpful to

parents and their children, the activities did not go far enough or deep enough to create the kind of information environment that would enable people to become informed and engaged. To gauge and build the information environment of a community requires that the starting point be the community. Only then is it possible to think about the implications for various actors, their roles and the necessary action steps that will truly make a difference.

2. *Progress in building an information environment will come best and fastest by using a specific issue to focus a community's efforts.* People engage in public life and with one another because they want to improve their own lives and those of others—in short, they want to work on things that matter. Thus, in seeking to assess and create a strong information environment, it is wise to do so by organizing the effort around a specific issue of concern to people—something that is salient and provides a concrete focal point for the work. It is at this nexus between a specific issue and building the information environment that a community can fully leverage its resources, talents, and time—that it can build its civic capacity and move the needle on an important issue of concern.
3. *Emphasis should be placed on how knowledge is generated in a community and its quality and flow, not solely on counting and increasing the sources and volume of information.* Counting information sources, aggregating community information and activities, and even providing information listings to people all have their rightful place, but more is needed if a community is to have a healthy information environment. Consider again the Santa Fe example: If the local United Way team had only counted the information elements present around Aspen Community Magnet School, they might have assumed that a rich information environment already existed. Instead, they recognized that the very nature of the information and its flows would need to be strengthened if people were to become more informed and engaged and help all children achieve academically.
4. *Taking effective action requires innovation, not simply good planning.* The mindset needed to assess and strengthen a community's information environment is fundamentally one of innovation, not one of planning. Again, think about the information environment within the three Santa Fe neighborhoods. What the team learned was that the information environment needed to be expanded and enriched in order to help all children achieve academically. But no one can say for sure exactly which elements over time will prove to be most important or what exactly each element will need to look like. This will be a process of discovery, and it will move in fits and starts like any process that seeks to create a new way of doing things. Moreover, such a process is seldom linear, nor can it be controlled

simply through making good plans. It will and can *emerge only over time*, shaped and given life by people who live in the community. This process of innovation goes hand in hand with the very organic nature of communities. All this is not to say that good planning is not needed, only that planning alone is insufficient. There must be an emphasis on innovation.

## Nine Strategies for Taking Effective Action

As noted earlier, the Knight Foundation and Monitor Group have produced the Community Information Toolkit for communities to assess and strengthen their information environment. Whether you are using that toolkit or other tools, here are nine practical strategies that can help people in a community take effective action.

### *Strategy 1: Create an Authentic Steering Committee*

One key to assessing a community's information needs is to have a credible group that guides and carries out the work. All too often community-based efforts start off on the wrong foot in this regard, entrusting the work to a small group of individuals made up of the usual suspects. As a result, when people in the community look at such endeavors, they seldom hold credibility in their eyes. The efforts fail to be *of* the community.

A key strategy for moving ahead effectively is to create an “authentic steering committee.” In past Harwood Institute efforts—such as the Reconnecting Communities and Schools initiative, which was used in scores of communities across South Carolina, Ohio, Alabama, and beyond—authentic steering committees have played a pivotal role in fostering people's trust and in serving as wise stewards in implementing the initiatives. These steering committees should be:

- **Local**—Members of the steering committee must come not just from a sponsoring group or organization but from across the community itself.
- **More than the “usual suspects”**—Membership must go beyond the usual players, traditional stakeholders and oft-heard institutional voices. It is imperative to seek out nontraditional voices from various parts of the community.
- **Diverse**—the steering committee must reflect the breadth of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives in the community as a whole. It is important to be aware of tokenism.
- **A team**—Build the steering committee as you would any high-performing team. Look for complementary skills, knowledge and relationships within the community.

- **Without its own agenda**—The steering committee must function in the spirit of “turning outward” and “innovating,” without pushing its own preconceived agenda or desired outcomes. Steering committee members must be comfortable with the inherent ambiguity that such an effort requires.

An ideal steering committee is made up of about 7–12 members, just large enough to provide a good cross-section of the community, and small enough so that the group can get work done.

### ***Strategy 2: Define “Community”***

This is another critical juncture where civic initiatives often get derailed. When people start working in the community, they typically insist on having an air-tight definition of “community.” As such, they can then descend into endless debates over the boundaries of community—where one stops and another starts.

Ultimately, there are three key judgments that one needs to make in order to move ahead with confidence:

- **Pick a definition of community that is reasonable and manageable.** It is important to choose an area to assess that is reasonable and manageable to engage. Do not over-reach. Know that it is far easier to expand the area of the community in the future by building on successful efforts than to manage an unwieldy, over-ambitious plan that becomes too difficult to fulfill.
- **Make a clear choice about your focus.** Know that you can focus on a single neighborhood, a particular part of town, an entire city, a region of a state or other geographic area. In addition, you can choose to define “community” in terms of affinity groups or an issue area (e.g., education), among others.
- **Be explicit about your underlying assumptions.** Take the time to articulate why you made the choice of community you have—which parts of the community will be included and which parts, at least for now, will be left for another day.

Finally, there is an additional step in reaching a clearer understanding of the best definition of community to use moving forward, and that is to ask the community itself. Strategy 3 below, Engage the Community Early On, enables this.

### ***Strategy 3: Engage the Community Early On***

When I work with different groups, it is not until they actually go into the community, and hear people talk about their community, that they are truly able to turn outward, know what people care about, and gain a clearer understanding of how to define “community” for their work.

For example, in Las Vegas, KNPR, the public radio station, only realized by engaging the community the extent to which people sought to be re-connected to one another. KNPR staff heard the local issues people in the community were concerned about. This led the station to make fundamental changes in the focus of its flagship public affairs program, shift its website from simply promoting the station to a community portal where people can connect to each other and to various groups in the community and grow a new network of unlikely partners to work together, among other strategic moves.

Strategy 3 entails going into the area you have targeted and holding a series of community conversations. The number of conversations to hold will vary by the size and scope of the designated area, but one simple rule of thumb is to start small, with no more than three conversations; then, pause to determine what you are learning. Usually after three conversations it is possible to gauge how many additional conversations will be helpful to hold, how to define better the community you wish to focus on and where to hold the additional conversations.

Listening for the right insights from the community is critical to implementing this strategy effectively. The key is to look for patterns in people’s responses, especially in the following two areas, which will help in understanding what really matters to people.

- **Know people’s aspirations.** This is important because people’s aspirations will signal the kind of community people want to create. Use these aspirations as the North Star for all your efforts moving forward—that is, the actions you take to grow the community’s information environment should be focused on enabling people and the community to move toward these aspirations.
- **Know people’s concerns.** Pay special attention to how people define and talk about their concerns. Typically, people talk in terms of “webs of concerns,” connecting one issue to another, and it is when these webs are understood that it is possible to discern what is significant to people. Below is an example of webs of concern from community conversations previously held in Tallahassee, Florida. A community’s information environment must help people learn about, engage in, and address their webs of concerns. Otherwise, it is possible to create a rich information environment, but one that is not connected to what matters to people.

### Field Notes: A Web of Concerns in Tallahassee

On page 17 is one of the Harwood Institute's "issue maps" that emerged from community conversations in Tallahassee, Florida, held at a time when the community had become divided over the issue of traffic, leading to gridlock over the community's growth. In the community conversations, Tallahasseeans told us they could hear an active debate on growth among local leaders and in the media, but they felt excluded from it. To them, the debate had been framed in terms of a false choice: a continued push for more development and growth, or limited or no growth at all.

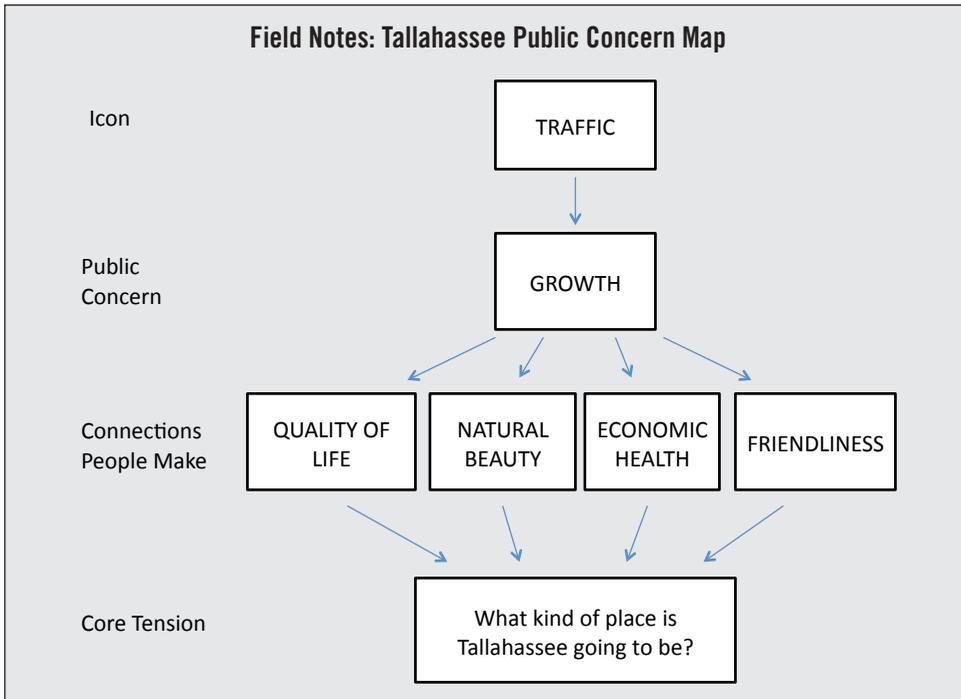
But as Tallahasseeans talked in the community conversations, they revealed a "web of concerns" that reflected the issues they struggled with and wanted to discuss as a community. When exploring the issues of traffic and growth, people made connections among four key concerns: the community's quality of life, natural beauty, economic health, and friendliness. The underlying tension for people was neither traffic nor growth but, "What kind of place is Tallahassee going to be?"

For those seeking to assess and build their community's information environment, it is vital to understand the webs of concern that matter to people. If, in Tallahassee, the focus had been only on traffic and growth, then efforts to inform and engage people would not have been relevant. Instead, the efforts had to focus on what kind of community Tallahassee was going to be and people's related concerns.

Asking the right questions is essential to uncovering people's aspirations and concerns. Below are four basic questions to help start the process. These are questions the Harwood Institute has tested and used in communities across the country:

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see things now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create the kind of community you want?

There are additional questions for use on the Harwood Institute's website. Groups such as Everyday Democracy, Public Agenda, National Issues Forum, and AmericaSpeaks also have useful materials. In addition, all of these groups have information about how to facilitate these conversations, different formats for the conversations, the number of participants to involve and other useful tips.



#### ***Strategy 4: Mobilize the Community as a Resource***

Whether using the Community Information Toolkit to assess your community’s information environment or another set of tools, you will need people to implement the effort.

Adequately addressing this need is an important facet of moving ahead effectively. Too often, new civic efforts are launched and become quickly bogged down due to the lack of capacity and resources to implement the work. But assessing and strengthening a community’s information environment can be done by mobilizing local volunteers. Think of this strategy as creating a kind of “local information corps,” whereby the very process of assessment becomes a community engagement opportunity in and of itself.<sup>1</sup>

These volunteers can come from the neighborhood or area you are focusing on; from local high schools, colleges and universities; from community service initiatives; and from community leadership programs, among others.

One good example of this approach is the Public Media Corps, which Jacquie Jones, executive director of the National Black Programming Consortium, writes about in her Field Notes below. As part of the consortium’s Washington, D.C. project, Jones and her colleagues created the Public Media Corps, comprised of tech-savvy people from throughout the community. The consortium has a step-by-step guide to create such a corps.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Levine discusses one approach to creating a local information corps in his white paper, *Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication* (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2011).

In each community, people are available to do the work and are honored by being asked to become engaged. Engaging new people reaches further into the community and builds capacity moving forward.

### **Field Notes: Public Media Corps Deeply Engages Community**

Jacque Jones

*Executive Director, National Black Programming Consortium*

In 2010, the National Black Programming Consortium embarked on an ambitious experiment to develop a suite of new models for connecting public media to communities underrepresented in the traditional public media landscape.

The experiment came together in the Public Media Corps, a service corps of tech-savvy fellows working in community access points, including high schools with at-risk students, community organizations, libraries, museums, and public media institutions. The idea was to find ways to best use digital technologies to drive relevant public media content and platforms to under-served communities.

As we incubated the Public Media Corps, all of our partners agreed that the process should begin with a survey in each community where we would work. The surveys would gauge which information sources people relied on, what their patterns of technology use were and what relationship they had with public media.

Ultimately, in the Public Media Corps beta initiative in Washington, D.C., we did gather a lot of data. At the end of the day, we found that the surveys put the fellows in face-to-face contact with over 1,500 community members—answering and asking questions and having a forum for information and concerns that fellows and residents shared about their communities.

Even though the fellows mostly lived in the very same neighborhoods that they worked in, that experience—having to turn outward and re-imagine a new role in their own community—was more valuable to the process than all of the data in the world!

### ***Strategy 5: Create a Discipline of Making Sense of What You Are Learning***

One product of the work I did with newspapers is *Tapping Civic Life*, a tool for journalists to report “first, and best,” what is happening in their community. This work continues to be used in newsrooms, in journalism and communications programs and elsewhere. This approach entails “civic mapping,” which allows journalists to identify and map the people, sources, issues and other key elements that enable them to become more deeply connected and relevant to their communities.

The tendency of many journalists and others when doing civic mapping—their *reflex*—is to want to do an exhaustive search for the *all* elements they are trying to document. They want to catalogue everything they learn. Before ever making use of their map, they want it to be fully “complete.”

But the most successful “civic mapmakers” always take a decidedly different approach. First, they see mapmaking as a discipline not a mechanistic technique.

They view mapping as a way to illuminate and organize connections rather than a way merely to aggregate more information. For instance, they see the mapmaking process as a way to think about and make choices to help decide the community they want to focus on and why, what is most important to know about a community, and who in the community can help them learn what they need to know.

They also use their maps (or even just the *idea* of a map) as a device to organize their thinking—for instance, which insights and data are most critical to keep, and which merely add clutter? In this way, mapmaking is a way for them to create clarity out of complexity. The goal is always to create knowledge about the community that is highly practical and useful. Too many details, too many layers, too many features, and the map itself becomes the focus of one's efforts and yet another obstacle to overcome.

Here are some key steps to take when seeking to make sense of what you are learning as you assess and build your community's information environment. These steps are best done initially by a small group of two to four individuals who are responsible for organizing what is being learned in the community assessment, who can then engage the larger steering committee as well as other stakeholders in the community.

- **Discuss what you are learning.** Make sure to fully discuss the insights that are being learned from the information environment assessment before drawing any larger conclusions. Otherwise, you'll lose important distinctions and nuances.
- **Figure out what it means.** Spend time to determine how all the information fits together, what it means and how it connects. Use the following questions to move ahead:
  - What are the real insights here?
  - How do we know these?
  - How do these insights relate to the aspirations and concerns we heard from people?
  - What else do we still need to know?
- **Produce a synthesis, not a record.** Pull together a clear sense of the key insights, including people's aspirations, their concerns and the patterns you notice when it comes to each of the elements of the community's information environment. As noted about effective civic mapmakers, the goal is to discern the most important elements of knowledge.
- **Create coherence over time.** Do not be concerned if there are gaps and holes in your knowledge; you will find that you are constantly adding new information over time. Filling in the picture only happens as your efforts unfold.

Jessica Durkin, founder of InOtherNews.us, writes in her Field Notes below about a similar process she used in Scranton, Pennsylvania. After she and another colleague analyzed what they learned from their community assessment, they convened 22 stakeholders to review the findings, discuss them and think about the implications. The group included a cross-section of leaders from different segments of the broader Scranton community.

### **Field Notes: To Take Charge, Start a Conversation**

Jessica Durkin

*Founder, InOtherNews.us*

I once heard that the rooms in the communications department building at a prominent West Coast university were deliberately unlabeled, which forced human interaction—such as visitors and new students having to ask for directions.

Dialogue gets at the heart of engagement; it's where a community can start to assess and take charge, for example, of the health of its information ecology.

As a Knight Media Policy Initiative fellow at the New America Foundation in 2010, a colleague and I were stewards of a local media conversation in the city where I am based, Scranton, Pennsylvania. I had completed co-authorship of two local information case studies comparing Seattle, Washington, and the Scranton-area's information ecosystems, and it was time to present the findings.

My colleague and I picked a day in May and gathered 22 stakeholders from different sectors of society to discuss our reports in the context of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities' 2009 study, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*.

The attendees included an administrator from the local public library, city councilmen, representatives for state and federal elected officials, the local daily newspaper publisher, the public access television operators, an independent blogger, a local university communications department chairman, a public school district administrator and directors of area non-profit organizations.

In that hour-long working lunch, my colleague and I asked the group, "How healthy is Scranton's information ecosystem in the digital age?" The roundtable conversation that ensued, in a forum that required a frank assessment of our local information systems, brought many issues to light: the city councilmen praised the newspaper's online comments section; the university professor and communications department chairman expressed frustration at the lack of municipal records transparency, digital outreach and the seeming staleness of the local newspaper's print edition; the newspaper publisher lamented the inefficient state Open Records system, which thwarted reporting efforts and was especially a disadvantage during a tough economic transition for traditional media; the people from the public access channel expressed concerns about insufficient city funding; and the non-profit organizations said they have much community news to report but the shrinking local media covers only a fraction of it.

This was one conversation, but it was a start. The dialogue prompted different groups to critically examine their role in the local information ecology. These meetings, paired with tools such as media maps and background research, should be taking place in municipalities across the country. Whether at the neighborhood level or a more formal gathering of stakeholders, these conversations are one way for citizens to begin accountability of their local media and to create a more healthy information ecosystem.

### ***Strategy 6: Make Clear Choices about What Actions to Take***

Many civic endeavors stall, or simply fall apart, just at the moment when people pivot to act on what they have learned. At this moment, efforts often become focused on a long list of disparate activities that may sound like a plan of action but that lack coherence and fail to address the real challenge at hand.

What is required is to make clear choices about the kinds of actions that will make a difference. Jan Schaffer, J-Lab Executive Director, was able to help a group in Philadelphia make such choices. In her Field Notes below she explains how, after a deep assessment of Philadelphia's information environment, a clear and focused recommendation emerged:

We found the city's media ecosystem ripe for an innovative Networked Journalism Collaborative. We suggested that it be anchored by an independent news website that would collaborate with other news creators and help support and amplify some of the excellent reporting originating in many of the news startups plus provide some original journalism on a half-dozen key issues.

Note how the Philadelphia recommendation consisted neither of a long laundry list of activities nor a single silver bullet, but a set of highly targeted, interconnected actions that leveraged existing assets in the community.

Here, then, are some questions to help you move ahead on what you are learning from an information environment assessment:

- **What will make a difference to the community and the people who live there?** Key here is to look for actions that help people move closer to achieving their aspirations and to addressing their concerns. Test all actions against these standards.
- **What are the real priorities in terms of building the community's information environment?** It is nearly impossible to focus simultaneously on all eight information environment elements in the Knight Commission report; my recommendation is to pick two or three areas and focus on them.
- **Who needs to take action?** No doubt, a range of groups and institutions will have a role to play here. The key is to identify those groups and institutions that you need most to make progress on the areas of focus you have selected. Also think about the role individuals can play—of where and how they need to be engaged.
- **What does progress look like?** Essential in this particular step is to be clear *and* realistic about what can be achieved over different time frames. Identify the short- and long-term changes that might signal progress. The goal is to get the community moving on the right trajectory and to help people see signs of real progress.

## Field Notes: Media Mapping Paves Way for News Network

Jan Schaffer

*Executive Director, J-Lab*

In 2009, Philadelphia's two daily newspapers were mired in bankruptcy proceedings, their staffs cut in half and distracted by ownership issues. A city once awash in award-winning journalism was getting uneven news coverage with occasional splashes of investigative reporting.

Enter the William Penn Foundation. Long concerned about public issues throughout the region, the foundation approached J-Lab, a center at American University with a deep track record of incubating local news startups and recognizing journalism innovations, to map the area's existing media resources and develop a menu of options for amplifying public affairs reporting.

J-Lab started reporting that summer. We analyzed public affairs stories in the city's two dailies, counting number and length of articles, comparing August 2009 with 2006. The number of stories had dropped more than 17 percent in the Philadelphia Inquirer and 7 percent in the Daily News. We commissioned logs for the May 1–7 evening newscasts for the city's four commercial television stations and found a 16 percent drop in coverage in 2009 vs. 2006. We inventoried 260 blogs and news sites and found 60 that had "some journalistic DNA," meaning they reported, not just commented, on news. And we interviewed more than 60 people—from local universities to mainstream and alternative media to government officials. Then, in early 2010, we convened 50 of them to brainstorm with us.

Some key findings from our full report:

News about Philadelphia public affairs had dramatically diminished over three years by many measures: news hole, airtime, story count, keyword measurements.

Philadelphians wanted more public affairs news than they were getting. They also did not think the daily newspapers were as good as they used to be.

The city was rich in media and technological assets that could pioneer a new golden era of journalism.

**Our Recommendation:** We found the city's media ecosystem ripe for an innovative networked journalism collaborative. We suggested that it be anchored by an independent news website that would collaborate with other news creators and help support and amplify some of the excellent reporting originating in many of the news startups plus provide some original journalism on a half-dozen key issues.

To incentivize partnerships, the foundation that summer gave J-Lab a grant to launch another recommendation: an Enterprise Reporting Awards program, which supplied \$5,000 awards for 14 in-depth projects that entailed media collaboration. They are well underway.

Much has happened since then. The William Penn Foundation awarded Temple University a \$2.4 million grant to seed the creation of what is called, for now, a broadly collaborative Philadelphia Public Interest Information Network. Plans are now afoot to make it a reality.

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*You can see the full report here: [http://www.j-lab.org/publications/philadelphia\\_media\\_project/](http://www.j-lab.org/publications/philadelphia_media_project/)*

### ***Strategy 7: Actively Cultivate Boundary-Spanning Organizations and Groups***

The Knight Commission calls for “intermediary organizations” to play an essential role in creating more informed and engaged communities. These intermediaries are envisioned as the engines of assessing and building healthy information environments.

In most communities, there are already scores of groups doing good work in particular niches that fill immediate and long-term needs. But look around and it is just as likely that there are far fewer groups (often just one or two) that actually span boundaries within the community, or, for that matter, across communities. Even those groups that do span boundaries are often overworked, even overwhelmed.

By “boundary-spanning” I mean those organizations and groups that bring people together across dividing lines, incubate new ideas and spin them off, and hold up a mirror to a community so people can see and hear one another and their shared realities. In some communities, public radio and television stations are natural boundary spanners, as are community foundations, public libraries, and local United Ways, among others.

Despite the urgent need for more boundary spanners, too many organizations and groups have become inward looking, obsessed with their own strategic planning, internal processes, turf battles and positioning. Key to assessing and building a community’s information environment is to identify and cultivate groups and organizations that can play a boundary-spanning role.

### ***Strategy 8: Tell the Community’s Story of Change***

Telling stories of change is critical to the very innovation required to meet a community’s information needs. Told well, and over time, such stories can help a community create a “can-do narrative” about its ability to tackle change, invite people to step forward and help people to see that it is possible for them to engage in productive ways with others.

Such stories are especially important in light of the negative conditions that frame many communities’ realities. And one must take care in telling them, not offering hype or hyperbole but authentic stories that reflect people’s efforts.

Imagine what these stories might sound like based on the Field Notes from this paper. In Scranton, the stories might focus on how the community strengthened its news media outlets to better cover local news and how government transparency increased, especially on important community issues involving the economic transition of a hard-hit, rust belt community.

In Philadelphia, there might be stories of how different groups came together to create a new journalism network and how that network now helps to inform and engage community members. There also could be stories that follow individuals over time in how they stepped forward, engaged with others and are taking action on critical community concerns.

There might be stories in Washington, D.C. about individual Public Media Corps members and their experiences in engaging people in the community, what they learned about the community, what they discovered about themselves and how their own relationship to community and public life is changing.

I often think about such stories as being “civic parables”—that is, they help people see themselves in the change that’s taking place in the community and how they themselves can step forward to make a difference. Such parables do not hide what is hard about making progress or even the failures people have encountered along their paths.

### ***Strategy 9: Ensure Enough Entry Points for People to Engage***

Each day, people make decisions about whether to learn more about a given issue, engage with others in public life and take action. Each person decides whether or not to cross the little metal strip beneath their front door—the *threshold*—to come into the public square.

Lew Friedland writes about this decision, below, when he says that, when people consider engaging in community life, “every citizen asks him or herself: is this worth my time?”

Simply increasing the volume and dissemination of information, or expanding the number of information sources, will not solve these challenges.

Instead, think about your information environment using the following tests that gauge whether your community is providing enough opportunities to help people step over the threshold into public life:

- Can people see and hear themselves—are their lives, their aspirations and concerns, the things that matter to them, reflected in the information environment?
- Where are different places across the information environment where people with different interests, learning styles and varied desires can become informed and engaged in the community? Think of these places as “on ramps” for people into community and public life.
- What opportunities exist for people to come together with others and become part of something larger than themselves?
- How can people stay connected to others over time?

Each person calculates whether his or her decision to step into public life will have a positive impact. People are not looking for a guarantee, only a sense of possibility that is created in part when we can meet the tests laid out above.

### Field Notes: Finding the Information Commons

Lew Friedland

*Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication and Founding Director,  
Center for Communication and Democracy, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

One of the key challenges of making information environments work is to push those working on the information needs of communities to stop and first consider the core needs of communities and how communities come to understand these core needs.

The challenge of building a strong community information infrastructure varies considerably with the kind of community. Some communities are well resourced economically or civically. In others there are stark inequalities of both economic and social capital. Some communities have the civic infrastructure that allows people of different races, incomes and neighborhoods to talk about civic issues and problems across multiple and often complicated boundaries; others do not.

This paper pushes all of us in the information community to ask the hard question, “What do communities need?” before we can answer the question, “What can information do?” Community information ecologies are also *civic information ecologies*, and the interaction between civic life and information is key to making them work.

Projects in Madison, Wisconsin, and Seattle geared towards building *community information commons* are trying to build community capacity as a way of building information infrastructure. Both projects assume that before citizens become engaged in information issues they have to see other core needs being addressed, whether for food, transportation, education or rich and vibrant neighborhoods.

Because all civic action is subject to the constraints of voluntary action, every citizen asks him or herself, “Is this worth my time?” Focusing on core community needs first offers a path to building a more useful information infrastructure as well.

### How Change Occurs

When I work with different groups in communities who are concerned with informing and engaging people—including public broadcasters, local United Ways, public libraries, community colleges and art groups, among others—they often want people to see them as the central destination for all things community. And yet, this viewpoint fails to take into account three key realities: how communities actually change and evolve, the different roles that different people and groups play in that change and the importance of how information *flows* throughout a community.

Newspaper readers, for instance, have routinely said they view newspapers as just one of many sources for learning about the community and forming their own judgments about key issues. What newspapers and other community groups often miss is that people piece together their understanding of issues—indeed, their understanding of their lives—from various sources over time, and that a community’s awareness and change result from a host of factors.

What many community groups need to examine is the space they best occupy in a community and the implications for what they do.

At a meeting with community foundation executives and thought leaders on the information needs of communities, I was struck by the extent to which they too seemed to believe that change would begin and end with them. For example, creating a community knowledge hub, they assumed, meant they had full responsibility for driving all matters associated with it. They envisioned a large, singular civic endeavor that they would identify, direct, own and manage. It was as if they believed they could control the community, and its very nature, simply by planning and implementing a project.

Faced with such a daunting prospect, many of the leaders were fearful of undertaking any such effort.

In reality, most change in communities occurs through pockets of activity that emerge and take root over time. These pockets result from individuals, small groups, and various organizations seeing an opportunity for change and seizing it, often through trial and error. Seldom are the collection of such pockets orchestrated through a top-down, linear plan; instead, they happen when people and groups start to engage and interact. In this way, different groups at different times play a crucial catalytic and connecting role—helping to foster the conditions for people to tap their own potential and join together to forge a way forward.

The point for those seeking to gauge and grow a community's information environment is not to see or create a single information destination, but to develop many and varied touch-points for people who are stepping into and making their way through community and public life. It is important not to try and own the space, control the flow of information, or dictate change, but to generate multiple information sources in the community.

### **Tapping Into Community Resources: Who Can Do What**

Implementing the ideas and strategies in this paper will require a cross-section of individuals, organizations and groups from throughout the community. Every community already has existing capacities that can be tapped for this purpose. Below are suggestions of such resources to help get efforts started and to help generate additional ideas.

- Local newspapers
- Public library
- Community foundations
- Local television and public broadcasting stations
- Urban League

- Business leaders
- School board
- Elected officials
- Non-profits

There are additional individuals and groups that can bring special knowledge to efforts to assess and build the community's information environment. They can reach deep into the community in authentic ways that hold credibility within specific parts of the community.

- Leaders of local religious institutions
- Community bloggers
- Neighborhood association members
- Local college or university professors
- Neighborhood businesses
- Community website leaders
- Youth leaders

## Getting Started

Sometimes the first step in getting started is to determine if you and others in your community believe that assessing your information environment would be beneficial to the community and if now is the right time to undertake such an endeavor. Here are suggestions for how you can make these decisions:

1. Identify one or two other possible collaborators in your community—for suggestions, see *Tapping Into Community Resources: Who Can Do What*, above.
2. Send a copy of this paper to those individuals you have identified to help them start thinking about what it means to assess and build a community's information environment.
3. Hold a one-hour conversation that asks the following questions:
  - a. What are our aspirations for the community?
  - b. What are the pressing concerns in the community, and which one(s) might be a good focus for a community information assessment?
  - c. How would assessing and building the community's information environment help the community move ahead on the aspirations and concerns identified?
  - d. What "community" might we assess (see Strategy 2)?

4. Based on the discussion, decide if you want to keep moving ahead.
5. If “yes,” then move on to the following:
  - a. Identify three to five additional potential partners you can involve—again, use *Tapping Into Community Resources: Who Can Do What, above*, for possible ideas.
  - b. Share with them the results of your initial conversation and ask them for their thoughts, reflections and interest in moving ahead.
6. Convene the larger group to start using the Community Information Toolkit and this paper to guide your efforts moving forward.

### **Fulfilling the Promise**

Now that I outlined this approach, I want to return to the central theme that has animated this paper: the call to turn outward to the community and innovate.

Many civic endeavors start off with great fanfare, sounding all the right phrases and words, only to end up producing yet another glossy report that sits gathering dust on the shelf. Such efforts invariably begin by making a pledge to engage people, listen to them, and act on their aspirations. But then leaders and implementers retire to their conference rooms to do their work. At best, such groups may seek input from a community, but never truly make their work *about* the community.

The reason why I have repeatedly returned to the need to start with people’s shared aspirations and their concerns is because that is what matters to people. These are the things that make up daily life for people—that give meaning and motivate them to want to come into community and public life.

When it comes to attempts to address a community’s information needs, it would be easy to disconnect such efforts from what matters most to people. But little will change if a small collection of well-intentioned people set out to build all sorts of online information hubs, new networks, enhanced data sets, and other activities, only for them to miss the mark when it comes to what matters to people.

All the RSS feeds, blogs, recommendation filters, online rating tools, and social bookmarking sites are only valuable in so much as they help people turn toward one another and enable a community to make progress on key concerns. It is true that such functions make the Web what it is—robust, vibrant, alive, teeming with activity. And yet, efforts to gauge and grow a community’s information environment must serve a decidedly *public* purpose. Such efforts must turn from simply aggregating, recommending and sharing content to helping people see and hear one another and to make connections on issues and ideas that are often fragmented or not illuminated at all.

We live in a time in which many Americans have retreated from public life because they no longer feel their realities are accurately reflected there. They cannot see and hear themselves in public life. They do not see avenues for making a difference. And yet, at the same time, so many people want to re-engage and re-connect. They want to come back into the public square. They want to join with others to make a difference. They want to feel a part of something much larger than themselves.

It is within *this* context that we must meet the information needs of communities.

## Quick Reference Guide

### Four Guideposts for Assessing Local Information Environments

- 1** Are you turned outward toward your community?
- 2** Are you focused on a specific issue to assess as the basis for building your information environment?
- 3** Are you gauging how information is generated as well as its quality and flow (versus just counting and increasing sources and volume of information)?
- 4** Are you using a mindset of innovating and not simply doing good planning?

## Quick Reference Guide

### Nine Strategies for Taking Effective Action

1. Create an authentic steering committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit local members</li> <li>• Go beyond usual suspects</li> <li>• Make it a diverse group</li> <li>• Build a team</li> <li>• Make sure it doesn't drive its own agenda</li> </ul>
2. Define "community"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick a definition of community that fits the scope of what can be accomplished</li> <li>• Choose a clear focus</li> <li>• Make assumptions explicit</li> </ul>
3. Engage the community early on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know people's aspirations</li> <li>• Know people's "webs of concern"</li> <li>• Use the four guideposts to discover aspirations and concerns</li> </ul>
4. Mobilize the community as a resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit volunteers to help perform assessment</li> </ul>
5. Create discipline of making sense of what you are learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss what you are learning</li> <li>• Figure out what it means</li> <li>• Produce a synthesis, not a record</li> <li>• Create coherence over time</li> </ul>
6. Make clear choices about what actions to take	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on what will make a difference helping people reach aspirations and address concerns</li> <li>• Set real priorities for taking action</li> <li>• Decide who needs to take action</li> <li>• Determine what progress looks like</li> </ul>
7. Actively cultivate boundary-spanning organizations and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify possible groups</li> <li>• Work to cultivate the groups</li> </ul>
8. Tell the community's story of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify authentic stories of change</li> <li>• Spread stories of change</li> <li>• Don't hide the failures or rough spots</li> <li>• Invite people to step forward and engage</li> </ul>
9. Ensure enough entry points for people to engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect people's lives</li> <li>• Provide multiple places for people to engage</li> <li>• Offer ways for people to come together</li> <li>• Help people stay connected over time</li> </ul>



# APPENDIX





## About the Author

For more than 20 years, Richard C. Harwood has been dedicated to transforming our public and political lives by supporting individuals, organizations and communities in their quest to create change. His belief in the innate potential of people to come together to make a difference in the world led him to found The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Since its founding, Harwood has partnered with some of the largest nonprofits in the world, as well as foundations and businesses to help people create meaningful change.

Throughout his career, Harwood has worked extensively with the journalism community—most notably with the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, public radio and television stations across the country, and most recently with the National Center for Media Engagement. He is a faculty member of the Public Affairs Institute and has lectured at the prestigious Poynter Institute, a national school of journalism.

Currently, Harwood serves on the advisory board for J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism where he served as a judge for the Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism. Harwood was also recently chosen as one of four judges for the Strong Communities Award, sponsored by Ashoka's Changemakers and the Orton Family Foundation.

Rich Harwood is an expert commentator and contributor on national and syndicated television, newspapers, radio and web sites, including MSNBC, The Christian Science Monitor, CNN's Inside Politics, The Jim Bohannon Show, Special Report with Brit Hume, and C-SPAN, as well as National Public Radio. He is the author of *Hope Unraveled: The people's retreat and our way back* (2005), *Make Hope Real: How we can accelerate change for the public good* (2008) and numerous studies, articles and essays chronicling vital issues of our time. His most recent written work, *Why We're Here: The Powerful Impact of Public Broadcasters When They Turn Outward* (2011), is available now ([harwoodonline.org/wwh](http://harwoodonline.org/wwh)).

His past experience includes service on the policy staffs of U.S. presidential and congressional election campaigns and as director of issues research for Public Agenda. Harwood was a featured speaker along with Colin Powell and Doris Kearns Goodwin at the White House Fellows 35th Anniversary Program. He received his M.A. in Public Affairs from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and finished his undergraduate work in Political Economy at Skidmore College. Rich grew up in Saratoga Springs, New York and currently lives near Washington D.C.

Rich is a teacher and speaker, inspiring hundreds of audiences, and making a strong case for his philosophy of *turning outward*, being relevant, choosing *intentionally*, and staying true to themselves and their urge to create change.



# The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

[www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s)

The Communications and Society Program is an active venue for global leaders and experts to exchange new insights on the societal impact of digital technology and network communications. The Program also creates a multi-disciplinary space in the communications policy making world where veteran and emerging decision makers can explore new concepts, find personal growth, and develop new networks for the betterment of society.

The Program's projects fall into one or more of three categories: communications and media policy, digital technologies and democratic values, and network technology and social change. Ongoing activities of the Communications and Society Program include annual roundtables on journalism and society (e.g., journalism and national security), communications policy in a converged world (e.g., the future of international digital economy), the impact of advances in information technology (e.g., "when push comes to pull"), and serving the information needs of communities. The Program has taken a deeper look at community information needs through the work of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, a project of the Aspen Institute and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The Program also convenes the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society, in which chief executive-level leaders of business, government and the non-profit sector examine issues relating to the changing media and technology environment.

Most conferences utilize the signature Aspen Institute seminar format: approximately 25 leaders from a variety of disciplines and perspectives engage in roundtable dialogue, moderated with the objective of driving the agenda to specific conclusions and recommendations.

Conference reports and other materials are distributed to key policymakers and opinion leaders within the United States and around the world. They are also available to the public at large through the World Wide Web at the following URL: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s>.

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.