



Transforming the News: Innovative Tools and Practices

Excerpt 3 of 7: Assessment of the
Knight News Challenge, 2007-2008

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LFA Group: *Learning for Action* enhances the impact and sustainability of social sector organizations through highly customized research, strategy development, and evaluation services.

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I. Introduction

Rapid changes in journalism, technology, and the larger field of media are compelling news organizations of all types to think creatively about how they deliver information and generate revenue. The exponentially increasing volume of information available on the Internet is simultaneously making it more difficult for news producers to develop and sustain users, and for individuals to understand the authenticity of the content being delivered to them. Furthermore, the advent of the digital age has produced substantial challenges for sustaining high quality journalism that requires real resources to produce.

News producers are in need of tools and practices that allow them to easily publish content, engage users online, collaborate, improve the transparency of news, improve work flows, and develop or enhance revenue streams.

In this context, the Knight News Challenge awarded grants to seven projects pursuing an array of strategies for providing innovative tools and practices to benefit those who deliver news and information – and therefore those who consume the information. Together with its grantees, Knight hopes to better understand the qualities and potential of tool and practice innovations that aim to enable the production and distribution of news.

This report was completed as part of an interim review of the Knight News Challenge focused on the early winners (2007-2008). The project cluster – innovative tools and practices – that serves as the organizing principle for this report was created through the process of conducting data analysis for the interim assessment; this category was not an organizing principle for the contest when it first launched. This report is based on: a review of project reports, websites and other materials; key informant interviews with winners, key partners and field experts; and facilitated review and structured reflection with Knight Foundation staff.

Key Learning Questions

- What are the key challenges in equipping news producers with the tools and practices necessary to be sustainable in the Information Era?
- What impact have these projects had on their users?
- What impact have these projects had on the field of journalism?

Overview of Innovative Tools and Practices Projects: 2007-08

The foundation invested in seven projects that explored the development of innovative publishing and reporting tools and practices in 2007-08: two projects were designed to provide new digital platforms for small news organizations; two sought to produce new platforms for freelance journalists in search of collaboration and funding; one endeavored to identify and pilot a blueprint for the newsroom of the future; one offered a concept and technology for increasing the transparency of news; and one offered a low-cost, user-friendly publishing software. The following table provides a summary of the seven projects.

	Next Newsroom	Populous Project (<u>Community News Network</u>), UCLA	Printcasting
Grant	<p>Winner: Chris O'Brien Grant Amount: \$60,000 Timeframe: 2 Years Year Awarded: 2007</p>	<p>Winner: University of California, LA Grant Amount: \$275,000 Timeframe: 2 Years Year Awarded: 2008</p>	<p>Winner: Dan Pacheco Grant Amount: \$837,400 Timeframe: 2 Years Year Awarded: 2008</p>
Idea	<p>Develop a resource to help newsrooms redesign their physical space to be more conducive to the production and flow of digital and new media: Study and produce a concept paper on the design elements for the newsroom of the future, and help build a digital newsroom at Duke University based on these concepts become an international resource on civic media.</p>	<p>Fill the void of relevant platforms for online collegiate newspapers: Create computer software to launch a new popular online newspaper at UCLA that contains social media and is relevant for collegiate audiences, and can be used by other schools.</p>	<p>Support locally produced news content by individuals, community-based organizations and neighborhood leaders: Develop an open source, Drupal-based tool to create PDF newsletters, magazines, and newspapers with a built-in feature enabling users to generate revenue through highly targeted ads placed by local businesses.</p>
Innovation	<p>Next Newsroom pursued the systematic study of digital newsroom design in a manner that produced materials that can be adapted by news organizations of all types.</p>	<p>Address an unmet need in the field of collegiate journalism by providing a content management system, digital newsroom, and social network specifically designed for and targeted to college news outlets.</p>	<p>Democratize publishing by providing 20 well-designed, easy-to-use layout templates, enabling aggregation of blogs and other online content for easy publication in printed form, and creating revenue generating opportunities for citizen publishers.</p>

continued

Next Newsroom

Output

- Concept paper developed with the help of nearly 100 collaborators
- Next Newsroom website launched to share information and stimulate dialogue.

Reach

- After 1 year, Next Newsroom website had:
 - 352 registered users
 - 1,888 unique monthly visitors
 - 550 newsletter subscribers
- Website currently has 720 active members
- Twitter account has 779 followers

Impact

- Proposal to redesign Duke University's campus newspaper facilities based on design elements highlighted in concept paper was accepted by the University (though never funded and implemented)
- Palo Alto High School used the five Next Newsroom core principles to help conceive a new \$11 million media center for its students, scheduled to open in 2013.

- Turnover on the board and staff of the newspaper, as well as the [Duke University's Board of Regents](#), interrupted project momentum and made it challenging to finalize agreement on the newsroom redesign proposal.

Populous Project (Community News Network), UCLA

Output

- A beta version of the open source content management system was made publically available; however, the project faced the threat of a legal challenge over proprietary code allegedly embedded in the open source code.

Reach

- The development of the content management system was dropped as part of a legal settlement by the grantee.
- Certain open source news planning tools are still to be released

Impact

- Not applicable

- Turnover is an issue for long-term projects run by collegiate newspapers staffed by students.
- Programming and managing software development projects is time intensive and expensive.

Printcasting

Output

- Produced, released and tested multiple iterations of a user-friendly, open source tool.

Reach

- Over 400 people across 35 countries have used Printcasting to create 900 publications, many for the first time.

Impact

- Philadelphia Neighborhoods, a publication of the Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab at Temple University, used Printcasting to publish 50 editions of 8-page newscasts.
- A new digital publishing venture, called FeedBrewer, was launched by Pacheco, building on Printcasting concepts, tools and technology.

- A digital publishing medium (in the form of FeedBrewer) turned out to be a more viable business model than the pdf/print-based publishing model represented by Printcasting due to lower publishing costs and greater demand for publishing content across a range of platforms and devices.
- Additional capacity to develop and sustain partnerships with media organizations for piloting the software would have increased participation and accountability.

	Reporting On	Spot.Us
Grant	<p>Winner: Ryan Sholin</p> <p>Grant Amount: \$15,000</p> <p>Timeframe: 1 Year</p> <p>Year Awarded: 2008</p>	<p>Winner: David Cohn</p> <p>Grant Amount: \$340,000</p> <p>Timeframe: 2 Years</p> <p>Year Awarded: 2008</p>
Idea	<p>Provide journalists with a forum for discussing story ideas and connections: Establish an open source social networking site to allow journalists to exchange ideas and support as they cover similar topics and foster greater understanding of the relationship of local news to other communities around the globe.</p>	<p>Enhance coverage of underreported issues at the local level: Create an online, open source platform and system for crowdsourcing the funding and production of freelance journalism.</p>
Innovation	<p>Provide a unique and dedicated pre-publication space for journalists to post and learn about reporting trends. At the time the grant was made, news aggregators and other web search tools permitted journalists to learn about reporting trends through published content, but there were limited tools deliberately designed to facilitate collaboration among journalists as they research and write investigative reports on similar topics or beats.</p>	<p>Provide a marketplace connecting freelance journalists with community members interested in funding reporting on important local issues. Pioneer a community-powered form of reporting by engaging the public in the process of identifying and supporting the production of local news stories.</p>
Output / Reach / Impact	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launched Reporting On 1.0 in public beta mode. Incorporating social networking features and Facebook-like functionality to facilitate communication, Reporting On 2.0 was launched in July 2009. <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> By fall 2009, Reporting On had: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 1,000 registered users, An average of 867 unique monthly visitors. Reporting On had high uptake in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking parts of the world, with visitors from a total of 88 countries; Reporting On users translated the website into Spanish. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting On produced an open source collaboration tool than can be used by independent developers and modified to meet the evolving needs of news organizations. Reporting On faltered shortly after the grant period closed and was shut down in December 2010. 	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed and released multiple iterations of the online platform with increasing usability and visual appeal <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several thousand people have registered and created a profile as a reporter A total of 10,100 organizations or individuals have registered on the site; of those, 5,571 have donated either cash or time (by filling out a survey) to a story; of these 5,571, about 20% are return donors <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of May 2011, approximately \$200,000 has been contributed to Spot.Us, funding 185 reporting projects Spot.Us has established 105 publishing partners at a range of media outlets that have run Spot.Us funded stories
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporters' reluctance to publicly discuss stories in pre-publication greatly limited Reporting On's ability to serve as a hub for collaborative news story development Part-time dedication to the project was not sufficient to respond to user demands, site development needs, and promotion activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all types of stories receive equal attention and support: criminal justice stories are most likely to be funded through Spot.Us, while government and politics is least likely The Spot.Us crowdfunding model requires a highly entrepreneurial – and transparent - approach from journalists in terms of selling their story to the public The crowdfunding model is more conducive to long-term reporting projects due to the time needed to raise money The editorial workflow for the Spot.Us model is challenging and requires significant skill and staff capacity

	Transparency Initiative (hNews)	VillageSoup (Open Source Community News)
Grant	<p>Winner: Martin Moore (Media Standards Trust) Sir Tim Berners-Lee (Web Science Trust)</p> <p>Grant Amount: \$350,000</p> <p>Timeframe: 2 Years</p> <p>Year Awarded: 2008</p>	<p>Winner: Richard Anderson</p> <p>Grant Amount: \$885,000</p> <p>Timeframe: 2 Years</p> <p>Year Awarded: 2007</p>
Idea	<p>Provide metadata on online content to allow readers to make a more informed assessment about stories' credibility: Create a tool, "hNews," for adding information about the provenance of online news stories, so that individuals seeking information via search engines can distinguish between fair and accurate stories and poorly-reported information.</p>	<p>Innovate an online platform for community newspapers: Create an open source version of software that allows community news outlets to create blogs, promote citizen journalism, integrate online advertising, and "reverse publishing" from online to print.academic center</p>
Innovation	<p>The "hNews" microformat developed by Media Standards Trust (WST) and Web Science Trust (WST) has produced a first of its kind technical solution for news organizations that wish to both improve the searchability of their articles, as well as to receive proper credit when their product is re-circulated around the web.</p>	<p>Creating an open-source open source version of Village Soup's reverse publishing system; integrate citizen blogging and paid business posting with professional journalism stories; and allow news organizations to generate revenue through business memberships.</p>
Output / Reach / Impact	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established a set of basic provenance criteria likely to be accepted and valued by all news organizations and journalists Developed code to embed the provenance information into existing online content, including plugins for content management systems such as Wordpress to enable easy uptake <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early adopters include the Associated Press, who piloted it, provided feedback, and now deploy it, and aol.com. Since the official launch of hNews in June 2009, 1200 news websites have adopted it <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> hNews is being adopted by increasing numbers of news organizations and gaining a following amongst proponents of improved journalism standards 	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 225 open source (Community Edition) software downloads 22 commercial (Enterprise Edition) installations with 8 news organizations <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knox and Waldo Counties, ME served as test communities for the software. In those communities, with a combined population of 80,000, the software helped the Knox/Waldo county websites combined achieve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 170,000 unique visitors per month - 2.4 million page views per month - 30% of users visit the site more than 200 times; 73% visit more than 10 times <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online revenue, community participation, and consumption of community news have increased in Knox and Waldo counties, according to VillageSoup.
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since news organizations are looking for new ways to make revenue, MST and WST should adapt and market hNews to leverage its capacity to support advertising and sales by providing more efficient and accurate data, particularly in the case of syndicated news Finding a sustainable funding model is an implementation challenge for hNews; once Knight and Macarthur Foundation funds are depleted, it is unclear whether a membership or fee-for-service model will be viable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open source software is challenging for small news organizations—they must have adequate technical expertise to run and utilize its features. For these reasons, the Enterprises version of the software has achieved greater adoption

II. Grant Implementation, Reach and Impact

All seven funded projects followed quite different trajectories. The Transparency initiative developed an effective microformat for news metadata which is being widely piloted by several hundred news organizations and the Associated Press. [VillageSoup](#) met its project goals and is currently expanding usage of the enterprise version of the software (which is based on the community edition developed under the Knight News Challenge), enabling its users to expand their content and readership. Spot.U.s has pioneered a 'community-powered' form of reporting and highlighted the role crowdfunding can play in supporting local journalism, although broader adoption of the concept has been more limited than originally hoped. Printcasting gave up on the initial project concept, but has since evolved into a new initiative (FeedBrewer, with its premier product [BookBrewer](#)) that appears to be more in demand and financially sustainable. Reporting On and Next Newsroom experienced significant challenges with both project implementation and adoption, while a threat of a legal challenge resulted in the Populous Project ([Community News Network](#)) at UCLA scaling back its efforts and abandoning its work to create a comprehensive open source content management system for collegiate newspapers.

Next Newsroom

Chris O'Brien, a reporter for the [San Jose Mercury News](#), received a Knight News Challenge grant in June 2007 to study and produce a concept paper on the design elements for the newsroom of the future. This project was conceived in recognition of the fact that the architecture and layout of a newsroom are vital components of a news agency's overall system for producing high quality, relevant information for the public.

While many news organizations have shifted in the direction of embracing digital technology to create and publish news, few have invested in exploring a redesign of their physical space for operation in a digital news era. There are only a handful of successful examples of re-conceptualizing the newsroom; two examples include the New York Times' dedicated news lab and the [Cedar Rapids Gazette](#). [Next Newsroom](#) sought to produce a systematic study of this concept in a manner that generated easy-to-use materials that could be adapted by news organizations of all types.

An important design principle of Next Newsroom is the existence of plentiful open space to promote collaboration, as well as to make available for use by community members or groups that wish to contribute to the news. Modular design and wireless functionality are intended to foster a dynamic workspace that can be quickly adapted to meet the specific needs of a given project or evolving news platforms. The theory is that by combining these design principles with a rich dose of human interaction and an emphasis on a strong workplace culture, the Next Newsroom will foster more dynamic and innovative news reporting.

To initiate the project, Next Newsroom engaged nearly 100 people – many of them volunteers – in a collaborative process, including a national conference that drew 75 attendees, to develop the concept of newsroom redesign. Fifty volunteers conducted interviews and 20 newsroom visits to inform the process. Designed as a platform to

hold the information produced and stimulate additional dialogue, the Next Newsroom website was released in September 2007. After one year, the website had 352 registered users and 1,888 unique visitors, plus 550 subscribers to an email newsletter.

Another aspect of the project involved collaboration with [Duke University](#) on a proposal to renovate its campus newspaper facilities based on these design elements. After being initially skeptical about the concept, Duke University accepted the proposal, but never implemented it because of difficulties faced during the economic recession at the time.

While the Next Newsroom project stimulated some thought-provoking discussion about how newsrooms could be re-designed to adapt to the shifts that are happening in the media landscape, its ultimate objective to help Duke University build a prototype of the Next Newsroom for its campus paper was not accomplished. O'Brien continues to maintain the Next Newsroom website (with 720 active members), Facebook page (which 264 people "like"), and Twitter account (779 followers); however, the website has little content and appears to be only lightly used.

Next Newsroom produced a detailed concept paper for a newsroom design for the future that is available online for others to use as a resource. There is evidence of one organization using the Next Newsroom design concept as a prototype for its own newsroom redesign: [Palo Alto High School](#) used the five Next Newsroom core principles to help conceive a new \$11 million media center for its students. The proposal was approved by the [Board of Education](#) in January 2011, and it is scheduled to open in 2013.

Populous Project (Community News Network), UCLA

UCLA received a Knight News Challenge grant to develop and launch an open source content management system for collegiate newspapers, test it at [UCLA's Daily Bruin](#), and make it available worldwide by the summer of 2009. Shortly after being awarded a grant, the project name was changed to the [Populous Project](#). To launch the project, students at UCLA collaborated with CoPress, an organization comprised of editors of college publications, to gather input on the desired functionality of the software and to help identify student developers who could contribute to its production. The next phase (Phase II) of the project design was to create a "digital newsroom" to enable virtual coordination of assignments, and Phase III involved the development of a social network.

However, the project faced significant problems and was accused of embedding code from a commercial product as part of the brief release of the beta version of its open source content management system. Faced with the threat of a legal challenge concerning the proprietary code that was allegedly embedded, UCLA's response was to settle the case, which involved agreeing to destroy all code that had been developed to date as part of the open source content management system while continuing those parts of the project unrelated to the open source management system. Knight Foundation was not a party to the legal challenge. A few news planning tools that were created by the project have been developed into a series of modules, which will later be released.

Printcasting

While traditional daily newspaper sales have decreased, in some markets smaller targeted, niche papers have gained traction. Conceived to support the viability of locally produced news content, [Printcasting](#) received a Knight News Challenge grant in 2008 to develop an open source, Drupal-based tool for individuals, community-based organizations and neighborhood leaders to create PDF newsletters, magazines, and newspapers.

Printcasting aimed to democratize publishing by:

- **Simplifying the design and layout process.** Historically, high-level design skills, expensive software and a significant time investment have been required to create an attractive layout for a news publication. The 20 easy-to-use templates created by Printcasting, which can be mixed and matched, were designed to streamline and automate the layout process in a way that is accessible to those with little formal training.
- **Allowing online content to be easily disseminated in printed form.** The purpose of many blogs is to keep a specific, narrowly defined community abreast of pertinent issues. Printcasting's tool enabled the aggregation of

blogs in a newsletter or newspaper format, helping bloggers to broaden their reach, especially those with constituencies who do not have internet access.

- **Enhancing revenue generation.** Printcasting enabled local businesses to create ads using its template and place them in the publication of their choice for \$10. Printcasting was designed to keep 10% of ad revenue to sustain the site's costs, with the rest going to the publication's creator, thereby providing citizen publishers an opportunity to generate revenue. It also contained a feature enabling bloggers to register their content with Printcasting such that they received a percentage of the revenue if their content was used.

Printcasting produced a user-friendly, open source tool that went through several adaptations in response to user testing. Offering a built-in feature enabling users to generate revenue through highly targeted ads placed by local businesses, Printcasting provided a way for businesses and community groups with minimal advertising budgets to promote themselves in a cost-efficient way.

To date, over 400 people across 35 countries have used Printcasting to create 900 publications, many for the first time. However, very few of the publications ended up carrying ads due to the economic downturn, which made creating partnerships with local businesses to generate ad revenue nearly impossible. One organization that used Printcasting very effectively was [Philadelphia Neighborhoods](#), a publication of the [Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab at Temple University](#) that covers under-reported and under-served communities. Adoption of Printcasting software enabled Philadelphia Neighborhoods to enhance their dissemination of news to their target communities. Fifty editions of eight-page newscasts were published and received positive reviews by residents. Overall, however, Printcasting has not been able to track how many hard copies of publications using Printcasting software were printed and/or disseminated.

As part of a broader strategy to promote uptake, Printcasting established partnership agreements with five publishers: [The Bakersfield Californian](#), [MediaNews Group](#), [La República](#) (Peru), [El Nuevo Día](#) (Puerto Rico) and [Philadelphia Neighborhoods](#). Although partnerships were established with signed agreements, only two – The Bakersfield Californian and Philadelphia Neighborhoods – began testing the tools. The economic downturn led to the demise of several partnerships with publishers, as executives grew less inclined to invest in a new platform and layoffs impeded the development of strong working relationships.

During the course of the project, many Printcasting users expressed interest in making their content accessible through various other media such as websites, Facebook, tablets, mobile phones, and other mobile devices, rather than simply PDF magazines. In 2010, this push from users, along with difficulties gaining ad revenue as a result of the economic downturn, led Printcasting's founder, Dan

Pacheco, to pursue a new venture called [FeedBrewer](#), a multi-platform publishing company that helps bloggers and aspiring authors publish and sell content on mobile devices. Building directly off of Printcasting tools and technology, FeedBrewer developed a product called BookBrewer, which lets users format and create ebooks that can be printed for a fee. With the ebook market increasing by 250% every year, BookBrewer's launch was well-timed. In its first week after partnering with Borders, BookBrewer registered over \$20,000 in sales, all from a commission of 5% on sales of digital books published using their software.

Printcasting ceased to exist in March 2011 because its leadership elected to evolve the product via FeedBrewer and BookBrewer to meet newly identified market needs. Although now dormant, Printcasting's features may be brought back as a print-on-demand option through FeedBrewer. FeedBrewer voluntarily agreed to provide 6% equity to the Knight Media Innovation Fund to support other media innovation projects in recognition of Knight Foundation's past support of Printcasting, which had served as a model upon which FeedBrewer was developed.

"FeedBrewer and BookBrewer represent a much better model than Printcasting ever could have been, and it has completely changed my thoughts about supporting publishing operations with ad revenue."

Dan Pacheco
Printcasting

Reporting On

Although there are many avenues through which reporters can discuss their craft, there are few established specifically to discuss story ideas and content. In 2008, Ryan Sholin received a Knight News Challenge grant to create an open source social networking website to allow journalists to connect both locally and internationally to exchange ideas and support as they cover similar topics. Sholin ultimately hoped this platform would result in improved reporting that helped readers better understand how news about their own community relates to news from communities across the country and around the world.

At the time the grant was awarded, news aggregators and other web search tools permitted journalists to learn about reporting trends through published content, but there was no dedicated space for journalists to both post and learn about reporting trends before their content was finalized and shared with the public. [Reporting On](#) established a pre-publication forum not only to facilitate the monitoring of reporting trends, but also to connect individual journalists and to facilitate collaboration as they research

and write investigative reports on similar topics or beats. This increased collaboration was designed to improve the quality of local news coverage through the sharing of story angles, thereby adding context as to how a story fits within larger trends. Reporting On also created a platform to engage local readers in proposing and voting for topics they would like to see further investigated.

In October 2008, Sholin launched a public beta version of Reporting On 1.0. The project's first iteration was a Twitter-like system for journalists, through which reporters posted short descriptions of what they were working on or sent out questions or calls for support in a quick and informal manner. Reporting On soon evolved to incorporate social networking features like user pages and RSS feeds that allowed journalists to follow either a specific reporter or subject area. These enhancements were intended to facilitate communication between reporters working on the same beat.

In July 2009, Sholin hired two website developers to support the increasingly sophisticated design of the website; after a substantial rebuild of the website, Reporting On 2.0 was launched. By the fall of 2009, Reporting On had registered over 1,000 users and averaged 867 unique monthly visitors.

When Reporting On was still in development, Twitter had yet to gain the reach and prominence it now holds. Since then, the astronomical growth of Twitter and other social media-based communication tools largely supplanted Reporting On's intended purpose to support journalists who wanted to easily locate sources, story ideas, or information about reporting trends. As a result of Twitter's evolution and Sholin's limited capacity to continue managing the site, Reporting On was shut down in December 2010.

Although its impact was limited, it is noteworthy that Reporting On had strong uptake in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking parts of the world, with visitors from a total of 88 countries. Enthusiasm was so high at the outset of the platform release that several Reporting On users took it upon themselves to translate the website into Spanish.

Shortly after the grant period ended, Sholin stepped away from the project and it atrophied; users stopped posting to the site completely in December 2009. While the project is no longer in existence, Reporting On produced an open source collaboration tool that can be used by independent developers and modified to meet the evolving needs of news organizations. For example, it could be adapted to serve as a local Q&A application to connect journalists to their readers.

Spot.Us

David Cohn, a young graduate of [Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism](#), received a Knight News Challenge grant in 2008 to develop a platform and system for crowdsourcing the funding and production of freelance journalism. The goal of Spot.Us was to develop an online, open source platform to increase citizen engagement with local stories while simultaneously enhancing the coverage of underreported issues and experimenting with a crowdfunded model to support local journalism. With Spot.Us, a freelance journalist no longer must rely on pitching a story idea to individual editors; instead, they can set up a profile on Spot.Us and put their idea in front of a wide audience of potential funders. The Spot.Us platform also is a model of transparency, with reporting projects listing information about both the reporter and funder(s).

Shortly after the project launch, Spot.Us created an initial version of the online platform that enabled community members to pitch ideas to freelance journalists and donate to stories that they feel need to be investigated. This initial version was subsequently redesigned to improve usability and visual appeal. The Spot.Us launch received extensive media coverage, increasing awareness of community-funded reporting models and attempts to find new ways engaging the public in the identifying and supporting the production of local news stories.

A total of 10,100 organizations or individuals have registered on the site; of those, 5,571 have donated either cash or time (by filling out a survey) to a story; of these 5,571, about 20% are return donors. As of May 2011, approximately \$200,000 has been contributed to Spot.Us, funding 185 reporting projects. According to Cohn, several thousand of those registered on the site are reporters.

Partnerships with news organizations represented an important part of Spot.Us efforts to ensure the content and stories funded through the platform reached a wide audience. Since its inception, Spot.Us has established over 100 such partnerships, resulting in stories that received funding through Spot.Us being published through media outlets such as the [Los Angeles Times](#), [Oakland Tribune](#), [Mother Jones](#), [Wired Magazine](#), [San Francisco Bay Guardian](#), [Cleveland Free Press](#), [MinnPost.com](#), and the [Earth Island Journal](#). A prominent example is the [New York Times](#), which carried an article on a large patch of floating garbage in the Pacific Ocean that received significant funding through Spot.Us.¹ Freelance journalist Lindsey Hoshaw was able to raise enough money through Spot.Us – as well as a Facebook Cause page set up for the project – to make the freelance project affordable for The New York Times, which posted an online version of the story including a slideshow created by Hoshaw and excerpts from her blog entries while on the trip.

Spot.Us partnerships have also included civic organizations and nonprofits that, through placement of a Spot.Us widget on their page, can generate contributions for reporting on community issues.

While the platform is far from being self-sustaining, Spot.Us has created a model for a marketplace to connect freelance journalists who have the capacity to uncover information about important local issues with community members who are willing to fund them. The business model has already undergone some evolution, including the incorporation of an innovative process in which registered members earn Spot.Us credits by taking a brief survey from a sponsoring organization that, in turn, contributes \$1 to a Spot.Us story. A significant challenge for Spot.Us is the amount of labor involved in establishing and sustaining relationships with sponsoring organizations.

In September 2009, Spot.Us expanded to the Los Angeles market through a Knight-funded partnership with the [Annenberg School of Communications](#). At the time of this report, Spot.Us was considering plans to expand to additional markets in the future, including Washington, D.C., New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Florida. [Spot.Us](#) has received an additional grant from the Full Circle Fund to hire a community organizer to increase outreach and marketing efforts.

“...right now information about how news has been produced – authorship, publication dates etc. – is not captured consistently or transparently. If it was it could be of enormous benefit to the journalist, to news organisations and, most importantly, to the public.”

Media Standards Trust website

Spot.Us, which has won seven journalism awards including five from the [Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California Chapter](#), has made a significant contribution to rethinking the relationship between news producers and users. The model has received strong interest from other organizations and influenced a number of community-funded news efforts. For example, its open source code has been adopted and implemented by groups in Canada ([GoJournalism.com](#)), Australia ([YouCommNews.com](#)), France ([glifpix.fr](#)), and Greece (the site is not yet public). The platform itself also has inspired other crowdfunded experiments that have not used the open source code itself; for example, the local news outlet [Voice of San Diego](#) acknowledges adapting one of their fundraising ventures based on Spot.Us' approach.

While Spot.Us' model has not yet achieved a level of functioning and uptake that guarantees its long-term sustainability, it has demonstrated that there is a market for and value in stimulating user involvement in selecting and funding the production of community journalism.

¹ Mitchell, Bill. *Spot.Us Delivers Crowdfunding to The New York Times*. Updated Mar. 4, 2011. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/business-news/newspay/99327/spot-us-delivers-crowdfunding-to-the-new-york-times/>.

Transparency initiative (hNews)

Media Standards Trust (MST), in partnership with Web Science Trust (WST), received a Knight News Challenge grant in 2008 to develop a method that would enable news organizations and journalists to add basic information about the provenance of their work, in order to ensure that their work is labeled and credited correctly, and to empower the public to make a more informed assessment about the credibility of online stories and content. The method identified by MST and WST, finalized in partnership with the Associated Press, was called “hNews.” Building off a previous microformat called [hAtom](#), hNews enables a web publisher to add metadata — or “information about the information” — to online news and information content, and also introduces a format for describing the journalistic principles upheld by the publishing news organization. Ultimately, this process — dubbed by the MST as the “[Transparency initiative](#)” is intended to result in more truthful and accurate stories being selected by individuals seeking information via search engines.

The project started with MST and WST working diligently to establish a set of basic provenance criteria that would be universal enough to likely be accepted and valued by all news organizations and journalists. Early in their exploration of this concept, while presenting their work at an [International Programme for the Development of Communication \(IPDC\)](#), a project of [UNESCO](#) conference, MST and WST came across a team from the Associated Press who were — coincidentally — there to present similar work, albeit for a different primary purpose: to better keep track of their content online. After several subsequent meetings during which it was established that the two groups had complementary skills and expertise regarding this effort, the two groups joined forces to collaborate on a single product — [hNews](#). The microformat was revised based on feedback from early adopters, including the Associated Press, and at the time of this report consists of the following pieces of information about a news article:

- Who wrote it;
- Who it was published by;
- What source organization it comes from, if any;
- When it was first published;
- Where it was written;
- When it was changed since publication;
- What rights are associated with it; and
- What journalistic codes of practice it adheres to, if any

In addition to developing the concept — including the painstaking process of determining what information should be included — and the technology to power it, MST and WST have worked to promote uptake of this tool by

convincing news outlets (including [aol.com](#)) to pilot and eventually deploy it. It is hoped that use of hNews will become an industry standard. The New York Times has recently developed an equivalent to hNews in RDFa² called [rNews](#) to enable data linking (which has future application in a “semantic web”) and is working with a group of other news organizations to pilot it. Since the official launch of hNews in June 2009, 1,200 news websites — primarily in the United States — have adopted it; several technology providers such as [Saxotech](#) and [TownNews](#) also have adopted it.

Before hNews, search engines had few effective ways to distinguish between credible journalism and everything else on the web. Also, when reading “news” on the web, the public had no sure way of knowing about the credibility or provenance of an article. The hNews microformat has produced an innovative technical solution for news organizations that wish to both improve the “searchability” of their articles, as well as to receive proper credit when their product is re-circulated around the web. One significant potential value of hNews is that by allowing content to be more easily tracked across the web, it will help create an ecology in which it is easier to monetize distributed news. Furthermore, this technology creates additional value for readers such as enabling them to see — or be notified — when an article has been changed.

At a systemic level, the following benefits are expected to accrue:

- Public acknowledgement and discussion among news organizations regarding how to improve transparency in news.
- Increased cross-industry consistency/consensus on what information to capture and how to make it transparent.
- Increased public awareness of the qualities and criteria that make news transparent.
- Introduction of consistent standards for outlining the provenance of news stories among one or more news organizations, including among small news agencies and bloggers.
- Significant engagement of news organizations with hNews, particularly around exploring additional technical solutions and applications.

At the time of this report, MST and WST continue to develop and promote awareness of hNews, and are developing a service (called [itchanged.org](#)) to demonstrate when and how a news article changes over time. MST and WST are also exploring how to bridge hNews with the linked data schemas, such as [RDFa](#), that will become core components of the semantic web.

² RDFa is a code that provides a set of XHTML attributes to augment visual data with machine-readable hints, designed to turn existing human-visible text and links into machine-readable data without repeating content.

hNews is also encountering increased competition; for example, in late 2010, Google launched a news meta tagging scheme which enables systems to distinguish between syndicated and non-syndicated news, and provides mechanisms for linking to the original source of news content. Much of the immediate fate of hNews rides on the outcome of the [Associated Press'](#) internal hNews initiative.

VillageSoup (Open Source Community News)

VillageSoup received a Knight News Challenge grant in 2007 to create an open source platform that allows community news organizations to publish content both online and in print, and promotes revenue generation through a business subscription model. The model allows businesses to pay a subscription to contribute content that is published alongside content created by professional journalists and citizens; VillageSoup grantee Richard Anderson claims that this feature makes the software unique compared to other available platforms. The features that differentiated it from other products are the reverse publishing (online to print) function, the model for selling subscriptions to businesses, and the publishing of paid content side-by-side with professional content.

The software was translated into Java, tested in two communities in Maine (Knox and Waldo Counties), and is currently available for free download on Google Code.³ After completing the open source version in 2009, VillageSoup focused their efforts on creating an enterprise version, in response to their perception that many community news organizations did not have the technical expertise or resources to run the open source version. Released in January, 2010, the enterprise version includes hosting, technical support, and several features that are not available in the open source version.

Anderson reports that VillageSoup is sustainable due to income generated by sales of the enterprise version.⁴ The cost for the enterprise version varies, as individual contracts are drawn up with each licensee; typically it includes a baseline subscription fee plus a revenue share. According to Anderson, the enterprise version is improving the financial sustainability of its users and enabling them to expand their content and readership.

The original grant proposal called for VillageSoup to test the open source version of their software in ten communities. However, eight of the ten communities were unable to participate in the test phase for a variety of reasons: several Canadian news organizations changed ownership, news outlets on Long Island were not ready to participate, and a community in Alabama was overwhelmed by the disaster response to the 2010 Gulf oil

"You have the oldest paper in Maine that was owned by an out-of-state corporation and was brought back to local ownership by VillageSoup. We took control of the markets by providing business with a media solution that worked."

Ron Belyea

President of NetMedia, a VillageSoup User,
in Knox and Waldo Counties

spill. In the end, only Knox and Waldo Counties in Maine served as test communities. Those counties successfully used the open source version of the software, but migrated to the enterprise version after a year due to their desire to utilize additional features (such as the ability to publish one news story on multiple sites) that are not available on the open source version. VillageSoup does not track who downloads the open source version of their software (aside from information on Google Code), and Anderson is unaware of any other sites having adopted any portions of the open source platform.

Richard Anderson summarized the impact he sees in Knox and Waldo Counties as three-fold:

1. increased online revenue for NetMedia (the local media organization),
2. enhanced community participation, and
3. expanded community news consumption.

Businesses and organizations post over 100 stories per day to the sites in Knox and Waldo Counties and these posts average more than 300 views. Anderson says "businesses play a critical role on VillageSoup Digital Main Streets™, just as they do on the communities' real Main Streets." One very specific example of expanded community news consumption is the increased readership of obituaries based on the availability of online information about funerals and memorial services, which enables community members to find out the times of a memorial service before it has happened. He notes that the obituary pages receive a high degree of traffic; an average person in the community might have their obituary read 2,000 times, while a more prominent person might have theirs read 10,000 times. In a county of only 40,000 people, these readership numbers are high.

⁴ Current VillageSoup enterprise version subscribers include: VillageNetMedia in Maine, [Wareham Week](#) in Massachusetts, Miller Group Media Group in Illinois, [CapeGazette](#) in Delaware, Inland Media in Iowa, [Block Island Times](#) in Rhode Island, The Sports Department in Connecticut; in progress [Mountaineer Publishing](#), North Carolina, Beacon Publishing in Washington, and [AgriNews](#).

Ron Bellyea, who runs VillageSoup's software in Knox and Waldo counties, describes the revenue generation for the local news organization as significant. Two-thirds of the content on the Knox and Waldo news websites is generated by businesses, individuals, and organizations that pay to post and have their content shown alongside that of professional journalists. He notes that, for these two websites, the VillageSoup model enables the generation of \$500,000 per year in online revenue from subscriptions and another \$125,000 in traditional ad revenue, far surpassing what the previous paper was able to generate in the same communities.

Anderson believes that the creation of a sustainable revenue stream for local news organizations is the most noteworthy success of the grant. He notes that the Knight News Challenge grant made possible an open source platform and that an enterprise edition of the platform is already impacting journalism at media outlets in Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Rhode Island, and Washington, and has created a sustainable endeavor beyond Knight funding.

III. Lessons and Learning Opportunities

The experiences of the seven projects have revealed several important lessons about the challenges associated with developing new reporting tools and practices, as well as the elements of these projects that are important for success.

- **Projects emphasizing digital publishing on a range of platforms are poised for success.** In response to user requests for additional distribution platforms – and hastened by the challenge of generating ad revenue in a weak economy – Printcasting evolved its software into the concepts for FeedBrewer and BookBrewer, which are both based on digital publishing. Pacheco now realizes the value of a product where, “in place of ad revenue, people are selling content and keeping 95% of the revenue.” He adds that FeedBrewer and BookBrewer represent “a much better model than Printcasting ever could have been, and it has completely changed my thoughts about supporting publishing operations with ad revenue.” VillageSoup has also been successful creating a platform that allows news organizations to easily publish content to multiple websites at once.
- **Misuse is a common problem for transparent reporting platforms.** Many public relations and marketing professionals signed on to Reporting On, bombarding journalists with spam and impairing the site's utility. It was a painstaking task to manually delete these unwelcome users as a part of the Reporting On 2.0 launch. Additionally, Sholin from Reporting On found that reporters are hesitant to discuss stories in public for fear of getting scooped. This factor limited Reporting On's ability to serve as a hub for collaborative news story development.
- **Digital metadata offers a tool for monetization.** Since news organizations are so desperately looking for new ways to make revenue, metadata coding tools, such as hNews can be adapted and marketed to leverage their capacity to support advertising and sales by providing more efficient and accurate data, particularly in the case of syndicated news. This is already being piloted by the Associated Press in the form of an electronic news clearinghouse which, with the help of hNews tagging, will make it possible for any news provider to post news stories in one location for republication.
- **Effective marketing is critical to success.** Because the long-term success of innovations is typically dependent upon widespread adoption, effective marketing is a vital part of any web-based project strategy. While MST and WST have been effective to date in promoting the value and utility of hNews with key news organizations – especially the Associated Press– there are ongoing pressures to redouble efforts to build both technical expertise and understanding among news organizations regarding its application.
- **Partnerships are important but labor-intensive.** Testing Printcasting through media partners proved to be challenging, and Printcasting's Pacheco believes that a greater investment in developing these partnerships would have increased both partner participation and accountability. Conversely, Spot.Us' success in establishing partnerships with news organizations to public news stories has been instrumental in ensuring the crowdfunded stories reach a broader audience.