

New News Conference, Melbourne Writers Festival Closing Address

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By Jan Schaffer

Pulitzer Prize winner and Executive Director of the Institute for Interactive Journalism (J-Lab)

Hello. And thank you for inviting me to be with you. It has been good to be here the last couple of days and understand how similar your issues are to what is happening in the United States.

We are in exciting, but daunting, times in the enterprise of journalism.

As I look at how the media ecosystem is evolving in communities large and small across the United States, I am much more optimistic than pessimistic that citizens will get their information needs met. However, I also think that traditional journalists will play a smaller – albeit still important – role as the gatherers and disseminators of news.

The New News will give other kinds of people important roles to play. They include citizen media makers, partnership coordinators, fact entrepreneurs, creative technologists, philanthropic foundations, universities, advocacy groups and even governments.

In this future, both professional and amateur journalists will need to do more **than commit acts of journalism**. They also need to **commit acts of data**, acts of **information gathering**, acts of **collaboration** – and **acts of engagement** as well.

All this means we have to expand our scope of work just as we are forced by economic realities to reduce our feet on the street. In the New News era, journalistic enterprises must engage in new kinds of “*news work*” to serve their audiences. “News work” is more than reporting, validating and writing a story.

It also requires such things sharing information, facilitating conversations, crowdsourcing [inviting people formerly known as the ‘audience’ into the act of newsgathering], smart curation and aggregation, data mining and data visualizations, commissioning news games and exercises, gathering lists and resources, shouting out your good work to others – and responding to readers’ comments on it.

What this really means is that Big-J Journalism organizations can’t do it alone anymore, sitting in their ivory towers. We need to **deputize** new feet on the street,

incentivize new sources of news, **empower** new ideas, and **re-imagine** what journalism could be if it were to be a product that no one could do without.

Imagine a journalism where our audiences could walk away, saying: “Wow, that was a really useful story.” Instead of wanting to plug their ears at the noise of the latest political fisticuffs. Or glaze over more mind-numbing reports of the latest celebrity mishap.

Unfortunately, we still await developments in the **definitions** of news. However, many developments are already happening in the **delivery** of news. I see at least **eight trends in** the U.S. and you may be seeing some of them here as well.

- First is the blossoming of **hyperlocal community news sites**. Many communities around the U.S. and now here in Australia, too, have begun getting regular reports of town and school meetings for the first time ever. The impetus for these sites is coming from several places:
 - Individuals are launching some local news websites.
 - Companies such as AOL’s Patch.com are rolling out others.
 - Traditional news outlets are trying to local reports under their own brands, such as the New York Times’ Local sections.
- Second is the rise of **statewide news ventures**, many of them focused on covering a state capital and many with an investigative bent. These include things like California Watch and NJ Spotlight and Texas Tribune.
- Third is the birth of **independent metro news sites**. We now have at least 10 sites that have staffs of professional journalists covering news in such cities as Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco, Minneapolis, St. Louis and New York City.
- Fourth: the growth of more **university-based news sites** using students but also working with local residents to cover nearby communities. We have funded several, including Grand Avenue News at the University of Miami, Grosse Pointe Today at Wayne State and Intersections: South Los Angeles at the University of Southern California-Annenberg.
- Fifth: the increasing participation of **creative technologists** in building innovative news applications. Last year, the New York Times won J-Lab’s Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism with a body of journalistic work built on computer programming skills. They included such things as Document Cloud to read documents online, Word Train to track key words, and Represent to track elected officials.
- Sixth: the increase in **collaboration**, instead of competition, between old media and new media makers, and organizing these experiments into citywide networks.

A year ago, J-Lab funded a Networked Journalism pilot project that paired five legacy news organizations with five local news sites in their communities. All have added new partners and all the partners want to continue working together for a second year to develop some ad networks.

- Seventh: The increasing participation of **philanthropic foundations** in supporting independent journalism startups and community information needs. Foundations once worried about funding projects that might compete with fragile legacy news organizations. More recently in the U.S., however, they have become so alarmed at the diminishing news coming from downsized local news outlets that they are seeking ways to intervene.
- Last is the rise of respected **advocacy news sites** on both the national and local level. Sunlight Foundation is a key example of advocating for transparency in government while also creating amazing ideas for news coverage. It just won this year's Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism with its dynamic, multi-faceted coverage of last spring's health care summit. In such cities as Chicago and Philadelphia, local niche news sites are reporting on public education while also advocating for good schools.
 - But there's a caveat here: We're also beginning to see the emergence of more agenda-driven, politically partisan sites that are masquerading as neutral news sites. How will readers know which advocacy sites have some journalistic DNA and which do not? This is yet to be determined.

All of these developments involve tremendous experiments in the area of "news work." Not all of these initiatives will be successful, but many are producing excellent journalism.

Most are exploring hybrid models of support, eking out income via a variety of sources – memberships, donations, sponsorships, advertising, coupon deals, events, fee-based training, crowd-funded stories, grants and consulting. Yes, some of these news sites are starting to make money by training local businesses and nonprofits in how to build websites or use social media.

It's interesting to me that while all this experimentation is going on around business models for journalism and delivery models for journalism, there seems to be very little invention around that involves the product itself – the stories that comprise our journalism. At best, we've added some multimedia bells and whistles, some moving parts and some digital options.

I think there are a lot of opportunities to offer journalism that has more **added value** than what we are now generally producing. There are opportunities for:

- Coverage of "**master narratives:**" Stories that take the 5,000-foot view instead of the 50-foot view of important issues.

- Stories that **connect the dots** on trends or developments that help people make sense of their world.
- More **explanatory journalism** that really unpacks issues and not just parrots pro and con viewpoints.
- Stories that do a better job of asking the **obvious questions** that readers have – but somehow don't always occur to journalists.

I will tell you that as I've moved from being a story editor to just an everyday reader, I frequently fume when reading a story and wonder who edited it. Why is there so much missing information? Why didn't the story even address the most basic of questions? I'm sure you do, too.

- Stories that **revisit paradigms** that define conflict as “news,” that engage in scorecard journalism, that pretend at balance by only parroting extreme points of view.
- Stories that **zag instead of zig**. That description comes from a former editor of mine, Gene Roberts, some 30 years ago, but I think it very much applies in new ways today. There's too much duplication of story effort. We need journalists who are skilled at rendering important things as journalism, journalists who can examine issues from fresh viewpoints.

Once when I was spearheading a big civic journalism initiative in the '90s, one of our funded newspapers, the Myrtle Beach Sun News, mailed postcards to its readers with six questions. One was: What really makes you mad right now?

What emerged were issues – such as offensive signs defacing that beach community – that the newspaper did even realize were bubbling beneath the surface.

- I also think there are opportunities for stories that make clear that **truth is a plural, not a singular. word**. There are many truths depending on various points of view. What if, for instance, instead of reporting on where people disagreed, we focused on where they **agreed**?

As journalists we do a very poor job of validating consensus. If a reporter is sent to cover a meeting where everyone agrees, he'll likely come back and say, “There's no story.”

Increasingly, news organizations should be liberated to just say “no:” They are not going to cover something just because everyone else is. They should take the lead to say: It’s not a story worthy of our resources.

To be honest, I’m not sure we know how to do this kind of journalism very well. We are so trained in the competitive race to publish seconds ahead of others, so initiated into the tribe of journalists that we don’t want to be shunned, so beholden to some of our sources that we don’t dare disappoint, so steeped in the conventions of journalism on auto-pilot that we don’t even know how to build up the right reflexes.

J-Lab funds a small hyperlocal news project in the town of Deerfield, N.H., that has going for five years. It’s mostly a volunteer effort, but it now has some 350 contributors and posts 50 original stories a week. They cover local town meetings and state legislature. I found it enlightening that its readers, in a recent survey, said they felt they were “better educated” than readers of the nearby daily newspapers about state and local government.

How can that be? Well, if you parse their coverage, they not doing scorecard journalism. They are just explaining to readers what a piece of legislation is about and who’s voting for it and why.

Another of our funded sites, NewCastleNOW.org, recently covered hot-button meeting in town with video and pretty much a chronological iteration of the session. This is totally contrary to what we are taught in journalism schools. Yet 35 people who couldn’t make the meeting weighed in with powerfully substantive comments and suggestions. When I got to thinking what that coverage would have looked like in a traditional daily newspaper, it would have had a lead that said something like: School Board Criticizes Developer’s Proposals. It would have had a strong high quote, another from the opposing side, a few paragraphs of background and some reaction from key players and it would be a wrap.

How citizen reporters define news and report news differently from professional journalists are just a couple of the things we have learned in funding community news startups.

J-Lab has funded 55 projects since 2005 with small grants, about \$25,000. Many of these efforts sought to train citizens to generate stories for the site. Some were university projects. Others were launched by so-called “civic catalysts” – those bumblebees that pollinate a lot of community groups and carry a lot of knowledge about their communities.

Here are five of our key takeaways:

- **Citizen journalism is a high-churn, high-touch enterprise:**

Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. Even then, they may be “regular” for only a short period of time. Projects that counted on citizens to produce content had to develop alternative plans for stories or they struggled with little compelling content. Our recommendation is to tease out, rather than train in advance, these contributors.

- **Sweat equity is key:** Projects built on the grit and passion and community knowledge of a particular founder or corps of founders have created the most promising models for sustainability.
- **Social media is game changing:** Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools are ushering in a New Age for Community News, creating robust recruiting, marketing, distribution, collaboration, reporting and funding opportunities that can put a new startup on the map with the speed of light.
- **The academic calendar is not good enough:** University-led projects built with student journalists need to operate year-round to avoid losing momentum and community trust. They hold great promise but must surmount great hurdles.
- **Hyperlocal sites are not a business yet:** There is great demand for local news and information but the supply is very fragile. Many of the projects that we funded are volunteer efforts. But others definitely want to be able to pay salaries and health benefits and build sustaining operations.

If we were to measure the New Voices projects by mainstream media or venture capitalists’ measures of success, we’d looked at how much money they raised or how many unique visitors they received. And some did very well.

But we also identified some other measures for success that may rise in importance as we look at future funding models. We found that the projects:

- Gave a community **regular coverage** that either never existed before or was, at best, episodic.
- Triggered **other news coverage** of community issues. The community sites served as listening posts for bigger media.
- **Became go-to places** for crisis information that town officials could not provide.
- **imparted political knowledge** and empowered voters in new ways. Newcomers were elected to office; voter turnout increased.

- Helped **solve community problems** or elevated community issues. Problems that might not rise to the level of a Big-J journalism story got addressed in the small-j journalism world.
- **Fostered community media skills.** These projects trained a lot of community residents in how to interview and videotape and edit – even if not all those trained stuck around to write for the sites.

We emerge from this stage of our grant experiences with some recommendations - both for startup community news sites and those who wish to support them:

- Try everything. Keep what works and redo what doesn't.
- Remember that the community doesn't only want *news*; it also wants *connections*.
- Think of your task as not just *covering* community, but *building* it as well.

With everyone in search of new revenue models for journalism, there is an assumption that sites must bring in money to be sustainable. Again and again, we've seen volunteer New Voices efforts that are sustaining themselves with little income. And we do believe that community news, as a new form of civic volunteerism, is one important model.

We also believe some kind of support, be it private, philanthropic or government, will evolve to support these enterprises because, once whetted, we believe citizen demand for this kind of information will endure.

Moving forward, the landscape keeps changing in exciting, but challenging, ways. Commercial competition is moving full bore onto the community news scene. Professional journalists, gone from their newsrooms, are ferreting out new ways to continue practicing journalism in the local news space. Social media is ramping up the speed of site launches. And, new technologies continue to introduce new opportunities and efficiencies.

What is not changing is the keen demand for news coverage – and for connections – in communities large and small, from metro suburbs to college towns to rural areas. We have seen how the opportunities for empowering citizens to *be* citizens are activated when they have the news and information they need to do their jobs as citizens.

Matching that civic demand with civic sustainability continues to be the challenge for the future.