



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

Environmental Change and Security Program

The Future of Science and Environmental Journalism

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Edited Transcript—Jan Schaffer

I run J-Lab. Nobody really gets what J-Lab does, but it's actually a center that tries to hire and create funded projects for a lot of journalists who don't have jobs anymore, as well as ordinary citizens. So we have funded about 60 start-ups around the country in the last four years. And what I think we also do is we reward innovations in journalism. We publish e-learning portals, to sort of impart some "Big-J" journalism values to newly emergent journalists around the country. The most prominent is the *Knight Citizen News Network*, it's *KCNN.org*.

So I want to show you today -- you're going to be the first to see, because it's still in post production -- a slice, a four-minute slice of some of the initiatives that we see cropping up around the country that actually make me more optimistic than pessimistic about the state of news, not necessarily the state of news organizations.

I'm going to leave you with three thoughts today. One is that we are, more than ever before, entering a period in which there is demand for an architecture of participation, and it's filling a culture of contribution. Ordinary people want to be able to contribute and participate in some way in the news media ecosystem. And it may be somewhat passive by commenting, it may be much more active, actually creating the news. But we're seeing a fairly robust sphere of activity happening there.

Second thing I would suggest is that we are seeing ordinary people committing both random and not so random acts of journalism. The random acts of journalism are very much uploading your photos and your videos, and if you're an eyewitness to a breaking news event. Organized acts of journalism are happening around the country with the startup of both hyper-local news initiatives, covering communities that have very little news coverage right now, or niche subject initiatives that may cover a special topic like science or environmental journalism, or maybe investigative journalism, or maybe international journalism—a fairly robust sphere happening.



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And the third thought that I would like to suggest for you is that news vacuums will be filled. They just might not all be filled by “Big-J” journalists. And how that's going to play out in the long run we don't know yet, but we are seeing a lot of activity in this arena as well. We see “Big-J” journalists starting their own news initiatives. We see “small-j” journalists, which I will call ordinary citizens, filling gaps: they haven't had coverage for a long time, and I think we forget when we are on the East Coast how many communities in the Hinterlands have little or no available media. This is not something new to them, to see declining news coverage. And so they're taking upon themselves to do it themselves, and they are creating their own news initiatives. And by and large, not doing a bad job of it. They're trying to be like “Big-J” journalists, which is very heartening to see.

I would point you to regional initiatives that are also happening, Newwest.net. I didn't want to do a PowerPoint and a video, but look at Newwest.net. It covers ten states in the Rocky Mountains region. Well, guess what? The Rocky Mountains region does not have a lot of available media and one of their focuses is science and the environment and growth, which are all huge topics in their neck of the woods; funded by venture capitalists, going great guns, do big conferences on science and the environment, publish magazines. It's a sample of a kind of new initiative we're seeing.

I think we're also seeing, in the vacuums-will-be-filled category, the emergence of what I would call new civic media networks, and these are content sharing agreements that we've never seen before, which is a fundamental change in the mindset of journalists. We have always been competitive, we always want a scoop, but now we have eight of the major newspapers in Ohio in a formal collaboration called ONO, the Ohio News Organization. We have three newspapers in Florida, *The Miami Herald*, *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel*, and *Palm Beach Post* collaborating. Yesterday *The Philadelphia Enquirer* and *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* say they're going to share content. *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Washington Post* are now sharing content. So we have an entirely different mindset right now of people who would never share before saying, “Okay, how can we leverage the resources that we have to avoid duplicative journalism and create some value-added journalism.”

So I want to show you today a four-minute piece of a video that we have produced -- it's in post production right now -- that focuses on foundation-funded media, and the role that community foundations can play in supporting information infrastructures in their community. Not necessarily as acts of journalism, but as acts of community building and community information sharing. And what we're finding, again, is that there's a lot of



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activity in this arena. I want to focus on one of my favorite projects around the country -- in fact, NPR just did a piece on it recently -- the *VoiceofSanDiego.org*; seeded four years ago with \$300,000 from a local philanthropist in the community, now operating on a budget of just under \$1 million, with 11 reporters and focus on six topics of coverage, including science and the environment. Could you, could you roll the video now, please?

[Video Clip]

It's really efforts like this that make me more optimistic than pessimistic about what's going on in the new media ecosystem. We are seeing a lot of vibrant activity. Some of it has incredibly good journalistic DNA. They're not all opinion blogs. In fact, for many of these people the word blog is kind of something they hold their nose at. They're really looking at creating what feels to them like a newspaper online. And I think we're seeing quite good efforts in that arena. The title of this video is New Media Makers. It is going to be available in about a month. If you want it, give me your card. It will focus on eight areas, six projects around the country, as well as pulling out buckets of who the people are constructing these projects, what are the ethical dilemmas they are confronting, how they fit in the new media ecosystem, and what kind of civic impact they are having in their communities. We also look at the role of foundation funding. So let me cut there, and open it for Peter.



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