



# **Collaboration and Connection: How Foundations Partner Effectively to Address Their Community's Information Needs**

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Prepared by FSG



 **Knight Foundation**

## General Considerations for Selecting Partners and Developing Partnerships

As foundations reflect on the goals of their local news and information projects, the following questions may serve as a guide to identifying and vetting potential partners.

### Organizational Capacity

Consider your foundation's strengths, resources, and expertise

- What are the unique assets and strengths of our community foundation?
- What skills or expertise are we lacking in order to best implement this project?
- To what extent does our foundation have the resources, skills, expertise, and organizational processes to implement the community information project?

### Community Assets

Consider the strengths of your community

- What are people and organizations in the community really good at?
- Who do we know in our community that has the skills and expertise that our foundation lacks?
- In what ways have community organizations worked together before to tackle this issue or other issues in the community? Who was involved?

### Compatibility

Explore the "fit" with your potential partner

- What do I expect to gain from this partnership?
- In what ways will this project benefit the potential partner organization?
- How well do our organizational culture and values match?
- Will this person or organization be a champion for the cause?

### Structure

Determine what management structure is needed

- Who will be accountable for the project's implementation?
- To what extent is formal commitment needed from each of the partners?
- What resources and skills are needed to maintain the partnership?



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## Introduction

Addressing a community's information needs is a critical aspect of supporting a vibrant and healthy democracy. As community and place-based foundations increase their participation in this work, they realize they cannot do it alone. Partnerships are vital to their success, whether they are developing online platforms for community dialogue, financing new online professional news outlets, or otherwise providing venues for community engagement about important issues affecting residents' lives.

Across more than 70 individual projects in communities throughout North America, Knight Community Information Challenge grantees have collectively partnered with more than 450 organizations, including mainstream and public media organizations, community nonprofits, other foundations, universities, corporations, local government agencies and libraries to address their community's information needs. Partnerships are allowing foundations to leverage shared resources and maximize their potential for success. The figure below depicts the types of organizations foundations are partnering with to design and implement their local news and information projects.

### What types of organizations are partnering with foundations?

PARTNER TYPE	PERCENT OF ALL PARTNERS	NUMBER OF PARTNERS
Media	24%	112
Nonprofits	23%	105
Foundations	13%	59
Educational Institutions	12%	53
Corporations	9%	42
Government	6%	28
Libraries	1%	6

Source: 2011 KCIC Grantee Survey (Rounds 1-3); 43 KCIC grantees named 459 partners in total (maximum of 15 partners per grantee); in addition to the ones listed above, foundations mentioned 29 partner coalitions or formal collaborations among several organizations, 24 individuals, and 1 "other" type of partner (e.g., "Flickr group").

As the learning and evaluation partner for the Knight Community Information Challenge, FSG has collected data from grantee foundations and their partners about how partnerships develop, evolve, and add value to information and media projects. This report highlights the strategies and approaches that foundations have used to develop and maintain productive partnerships.

# Partner Activities: What Can Partners Help You Do?

*“Partner, partner, partner. An unbelievable percentage of our success has been due to great partnerships. This project pushed us to partner given the ambitious promises we made in the grant, when we might have taken the easy route otherwise. (It was the) best thing we ever did.”*

– Joy Watkins, The Community Foundation of North Florida

Every community has a common set of organizations with local expertise that can be tapped to help inform and engage its residents. For community information projects, many foundations have found partners to be invaluable for accessing unique resources and expertise, and expanding their capacity to pursue key project activities, such as the ones highlighted in the below figure.



Later in this report, we describe how foundations have successfully managed partnerships to conduct each of these four activities.

# Types of Partners: How Do You Identify the Right Partners for Your Information Project?

Partners can play complementary and reinforcing roles in each of the four activities described previously, though some may be better prepared to take on certain roles than others. The following table illustrates some of the activities we've observed different kinds of KCIC grantee partners engage in to date.

**Examples of Partner Roles**

Partner	PRIMARY PARTNER ACTIVITIES			
	Create and Curate Content	Distribute Content	Conduct Outreach	Develop and Maintain Technology
Media Outlets	✓	✓		
Nonprofits	✓		✓	
Universities/ Educational Institutions	✓			✓
Libraries	✓		✓	
Local Government		✓	✓	
Corporations				✓

Source: Observations from interviews and surveys of KCIC grantees (Rounds 1-3)

When considering whom to partner with, a foundation should assess which activities it can carry out given its own strengths and skills, and then identify partners to fill in the gaps. Nonprofits, for example, can be a key partner if a foundation needs assistance reaching out to a community group that responds best to a more grassroots approach. Universities, on the other hand, may be well positioned to provide access to student resources or technology expertise. Based on insights gained from KCIC grantees, we've learned that certain types of partners are well positioned to support community information projects in different ways. The chart above describes some of the key functions of different partner types.



## Why does this type of organization make a good information and media partner?



### Media

#### partners can...

- ✓ Create and publish news stories, particularly those that require substantial investigative journalism skills or subject-specific knowledge (e.g., about state education policy)
- ✓ Increase project reach by disseminating content to a broader audience (e.g., public or mainstream media) or a niche audience (e.g., ethnic media)
- ✓ Enhance project credibility by partnering with an independent voice
- ✓ Enhance the capacity of information projects with digital media skills



### Nonprofit

#### partners can...

- ✓ Help design a project that “fits” well with community needs, especially for grassroots organizations that have their eyes and ears on the ground
- ✓ Help reach vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations
- ✓ Mobilize and engage residents around an issue or set of issues



### University / School

#### partners can...

- ✓ Build students’ digital media skills and equip student journalists with opportunities to write locally-relevant news stories
- ✓ Provide research and evaluation capacity to help design, implement, and evaluate new programs or technology
- ✓ Develop and apply digital media tools and information technology to identify community information needs



### Library

#### partners can...

- ✓ Provide access to rich archives of community documents and information that can be digitized and disseminated widely
- ✓ Reach populations that do not have internet access at home and help build their digital literacy skills
- ✓ Provide a neutral physical space in a trusted environment for community engagement and dialogue



### Local Government

#### partners can...

- ✓ Provide access to public data and information about social services
- ✓ Connect your information project with a broader community initiative in order to maximize reach and engagement and contribute to project sustainability
- ✓ Raise project visibility in the community by disseminating information or participating in project activities



### Corporate

#### partners can...

- ✓ Incorporate the business community into planning and implementation
- ✓ Provide expertise and access to technology for project implementation
- ✓ Contribute to project sustainability (i.e., through sponsorships)

# Partnering Effectively to Address Community Information Needs: Lessons from Foundations and Their Partners

As we highlighted above, foundations are partnering with community organizations to conduct four key activities related to their community information projects:

- 1. Creating and Curating Information**
- 2. Distributing Content**
- 3. Conducting Outreach**
- 4. Developing and Maintaining Technology**

In the following sections, we provide several examples of partnerships that helped foundations get their projects off the ground and ultimately achieve project success. We've also highlighted tips throughout to help others think about how they can develop their own effective partnerships in each area.

## 1. Creating and Curating Information

Creating and curating content is an essential aspect of community information projects. Content creation activities may include writing breaking news and investigative stories, digitally archiving historical documents, or live-streaming community events. Community and place-based foundations may not have the time or capacity to maintain a constant stream of information about what is happening in a community. As a result, foundations have partnered with media organizations, libraries, nonprofits, and universities to produce and aggregate the information that is at the core of their projects.

When foundations invest in local news projects, they often look to partner with local media organizations employing professional journalists to create news content. Staffing a start-up news organization with highly respected, professional journalists, especially those who have a history of quality reporting in the community and expertise in web development and production, helps create an instant "buzz" about the project in the community and establish its credibility.





### Media Partner Example



#### Activity

Create news stories by skilled and experienced journalism staff, to quickly established the project's credibility and core audience

In January 2010, **Hartford Foundation for Public Giving** helped launch the *Connecticut Mirror* (*CTMirror.org*), a news outlet that reports on statewide policy issues. From the start, the project benefitted from the experience and networks of a stellar team of professional journalists. By attracting and hiring top-notch staff with name recognition in the community, *CT Mirror* quickly built its own readership of engaged residents, including the foundation's stakeholders, and attracted additional media partners to the project. In order to support the growth of the project's team, the Hartford Foundation has committed its own funding, partnered with another community foundation to provide additional funding, and served as a resource, upon request, on issues related to organizational development, structure and partnerships. The foundation recognizes and supports the need for the *CT Mirror* to have full editorial independence over its content. As a result of the foundation's involvement, the organization is able to produce more high quality journalism on important issues, including education, health and the environment, that are of interest to the foundation and the community it serves.

Media outlets are not the only types of partners that create new content. Libraries, universities, and nonprofits are also playing a role. Libraries are a natural partner for community information projects because they are known information resources that are closely connected with their communities, particularly disadvantaged or marginalized populations, and are an increasingly vital resource in helping people navigate the internet and find information online.



### Library Partner Example



#### Activity

Create and curate content for the *Black Hills Knowledge Network*, a hub for community-generated content that provides local information to residents in the region

The **Black Hills Area Community Foundation** partners with a consortium of public libraries to scan, tag, and curate the content for engaged citizens and policy makers using a new online information platform the *Black Hills Knowledge Network*. The *Black Hills Knowledge Network* serves as an information hub for content generated by local media, government and nonprofits. This project has received financial support from a variety of entities, including the Rapid City Library Foundation, to develop the website's beta concept and provide training for regional library partners. According to Greta Chapman of the Rapid City Public Library, the lead partner for the project, "[Libraries] really have a unique opportunity to be a community space that is relevant to people because we have a strong commitment to people, their history, and we are accessible for all." The partnership between the foundation and the Rapid City Public Library has enabled the project to get buy-in from other libraries in the region, increasing the volume and variety of information that can be posted on the online platform. Through this project, librarians are stepping into a new role as aggregators and distributors of local information.



## Nonprofit Partner Example



Community Foundation  
for Greater Buffalo

### Activity

Create blog posts and other web content to help drive traffic to a new information and engagement platform, *GrowWNY.org*

The **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo** has partnered with nonprofits to develop web content, including news, blog posts, and listings of community events for its community information project, *GrowWNY.org*. Nonprofits engaged with *GrowWNY.org* have been asked by the foundation to contribute to *GrowWNY*'s blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feed. Over time, the foundation has benefitted from the contributions of more than thirty nonprofit partners. While these activities provide an opportunity to amplify the voice of small, lesser-known environmental organizations, it also can require a substantial time investment from the organizations involved. To overcome this challenge, the foundation trains nonprofits to use social media and communications tools more effectively. They created a "writers group" that champions the content creation effort and meets regularly to discuss topics and share ideas for using the site. This increases nonprofits' interest in and ability to contribute content to *GrowWNY.org*. As the website's audience grows and *GrowWNY.org* becomes a destination site for the Western New York environmental movement, nonprofit partners are able to reach residents that otherwise would not have known about their work when they were communicating independently.

Universities and other educational institutions can also be important content partners for community information projects. Students benefit from participating in projects by gaining journalism and digital media experience, and other project partners benefit from the research resources and training capacity of these institutions.



## University Partner Example



### Activity

Create community news stories by journalism students that are published on *TheNewsOutlet.org* and in-print by local media partners

**The Raymond John Wean Foundation** has partnered with Youngstown State University to design and implement a community information project called *TheNewsOutlet.org*, which trains and mentors journalism students to create news stories for distribution in local newspapers and radio stations. *TheNewsOutlet.org* student journalists all apply to participate in a semester-long class, which gives them the time and structure to research and report stories and to receive editorial guidance from mentor journalists. Having successfully implemented the project in Youngstown, Youngstown State University is now partnering with two other universities, Kent State University and The University of Akron, to replicate the project across Ohio. In its third year, the project has developed a strong reputation on each campus and attracts a strong student talent pool, which eases the burden of student turnover. *TheNewsOutlet.org* structure requires faculty to be intimately involved with students, as well as with media partners. This structure, which is different from many traditional internships, is critical to the success of the project. Faculty can spot problems with stories or students, run interference and keep all parties moving toward common goals. As a result, the universities are able to provide students with valuable career experience. *TheNewsOutlet.org* media partners benefit from having a cadre of locally-focused reporters who write about community issues that partners may not have capacity to cover themselves. Ultimately, the community benefits from better coverage of local issues.

## Tips Partnering to Create and Curate Information

- > Partner with skilled and experienced journalists when quality content is needed. However, don't assume you have editorial control over the content that is produced by your partners.
- > Don't assume media partners are the only ones that can create content for information projects. Look to other organizations, including nonprofits, libraries and universities, in the community to help create and curate content.

## 2. Distributing Content

Community information projects may distribute content through a variety of channels, including print (e.g., newspapers, newsletters), online (e.g., websites, Facebook, Twitter), and in-person (e.g., at community forums, town hall meetings). Online, the primary mode of content distribution is often a project-specific website. However, attracting people to a new website can be extremely difficult, and it may take a while to build a strong, reliable audience base. As they work to build new audiences, foundations have had success partnering with media outlets to distribute content.



### Media Partner Example



The Community Foundation  
BOULDER COUNTY

#### Activity

Distribute *I-News* content through a network of more than 20 media partners that tailor the investigative news stories for publication online, on air, and in print

In Colorado, **The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County** helped support a start-up investigative news organization called *I-News*. *I-News* has more than twenty media partners, ranging from print to radio and broadcast, including the Denver Post (print/online) and Rocky Mountain PBS (broadcast), which are the primary channels for disseminating the project's investigative news to the community-at-large. For each media partner, *I-News* creates a skeleton of a story or several different versions and lets partners adapt the content to their audience. *I-News* benefits the media organizations by providing high-quality investigative news – a time-intensive product to create. In return, *I-News* collects annual fees from its media partners and is able to distribute content to a wide audience on multiple media platforms (i.e., online, print, radio, television) across the state and further its impact far beyond what it could do as yet another online news site. For example, when *I-News* launched a story about electronic waste in Colorado, media across the state picked it up, and the Denver Post ran it as front page news. This prompted state policymakers to introduce legislation that addressed the problems *I-News* reported.

Not all media partnerships require a fee for content sharing. Many community information partnerships have agreed to collaborate in exchange for other benefits, such as attribution.



## Media Partner Example



### Activity

Disseminate and provide content from and to *Public Source*, a start-up news outlet, through partnerships with numerous media outlets in the Pittsburgh metro area

**The Pittsburgh Foundation** partners with Pittsburgh Filmmakers to produce investigative news stories through the new community information project, *Public Source*. When the project began, Pittsburgh Filmmakers approached several local media outlets, including the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, public radio station WESA (formerly WDUQ) and public television station WQED-TV, to establish partnership agreements that would allow the outlets to share their content with *Public Source* and distribute *Public Source* content to their audiences. In all, six media organizations have agreed to partner, because they recognize that *Public Source* can provide robust community reporting that they lack the capacity to pursue on their own. Despite some feelings of competition among a few local media outlets, project staff have been able to secure partnerships, requesting only that partners attribute content to the original source and not requiring partners to publish content on regular schedule or pay for the news stories. This structure makes it easy for media organizations to participate and gives the project a rich network of partners to ensure that *Public Source* content reaches a much broader audience.

## Tips Partnering to Distribute Content

- > For media outlets, avoid perceptions that an information project is a potential competitor by emphasizing how partnering helps the outlet improve their own visibility and impact in the community.
- > Look for more than one media partner to reach audiences in different media formats.

### 3. Conducting Outreach

Community information projects are strengthened by outreach efforts that reach new audiences and better inform them about important issues. In some cases, strong outreach efforts have also helped encourage residents to take action on issues. Partnering with nonprofits can help foundations reach specific groups in the community, e.g., potential donors, environmental activists, recent immigrants, or policymakers.

#### Nonprofit Partner Example



#### Activity

Reach out to new audiences and donor groups by participating in a 3-day online fundraising effort that helped raise awareness about *ACTion Alexandria*, the foundation's information project

**ACT for Alexandria** has partnered with city government and community-based nonprofits to create *ACTion Alexandria*, an online platform to engage residents in solving pressing community issues. To increase local giving and awareness of local nonprofits, *ACTion Alexandria* launched a 3-day online fundraising effort called *Spring2ACTion* with the help of Razoo.com. Staff from 47 local nonprofits received training to help build their social media and online fundraising capacity, resulting in more than \$100,000 in donations to nonprofit causes in Alexandria and an opportunity for the project to reach residents via the networks of several large participating nonprofits. *Spring2ACTion* reinforced to the community foundation's partners that *ACTion Alexandria* is an effective fundraising tool that allows nonprofits and residents to address community problems more effectively. For the foundation, these partnerships allowed *ACTion Alexandria* to greatly expand its online reach among engaged residents.

Reaching a broad audience is often an important step toward achieving positive community outcomes. Community foundations are working with media partners, as well, to reach and engage community members.

#### Media Partner Example



#### Activity

Host community forums covering different issues, such as education and the arts, in cities and towns across the state to engage a broad audience in the foundation's community forums

When **The Rhode Island Foundation** partnered with its local National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate station, WRNI, to hold six community forums on pressing issues affecting Rhode Island, the Foundation looked for ways to get greater community participation in the meetings. They decided to take the forums to communities across the state at meaningful venues, such as the Gamm Theater (for the arts forum) and Block Island (for the environment forum). Despite the additional time and resources required to set up a live broadcast forum in a remote location, partners agreed to take the show on the road. Foundation and WRNI staffs believe that this approach to outreach has led to much greater engagement and wider community participation than they would have otherwise been able to achieve.

When information and media projects seek to engage the community, a multipronged outreach strategy is often most effective. A multi-pronged strategy may include multiple partners that reach different niche groups on Facebook and Twitter, through direct contact, via television appearances, and in print. Each channel for outreach has its own strengths and weaknesses, reaching a slightly different audience. Foundations have benefitted from partnering with organizations that have close, trusted relationships with the particular groups that their projects aim to engage.

### Nonprofit Partner Example



#### Activity

**Conduct outreach to attract a diverse and, ultimately, bipartisan group of residents with the help of multiple nonprofit partners**

The **Community Foundation of North Florida** and its lead implementation partner The Village Square have partnered with various community organizations for its project, *We the People*, which seeks to foster quality, bipartisan civic dialogue around community issues in and around Tallahassee. Partnerships with media outlets (e.g., WFSU Public Radio), local universities (Florida State University), city government, and several nonprofit organizations (e.g., League of Women Voters, Florida TaxWatch), increased the visibility of the foundation's work among key stakeholder groups. Liz Joyner, Executive Director of The Village Square, advises foundations to *"draw partners in early, keep them there, and make sure they get something out of it. Community engagement is a win/win no matter where it's coming from. It's not a zero sum competition between civic organizations."* To attract partners, the project has proved its value by building credibility among community leaders, structuring events to maximize civil discussion, and supporting ongoing conversation through the *We the People* online tool. Developing multiple partnerships for outreach to different constituents has helped the project reach across the political aisle and attract conservatives and liberals to its forums and other community events.

### Tips Partnering to Conduct Outreach

- > Look for partners that can bring in new audiences and expand who you can reach in the community. Get commitments from more than one partner for a multi-pronged outreach approach.
- > In developing media partners, think about how their online activities can be complemented with local events and gatherings to further engage your community.



## 4. Developing and Maintaining Technology

Developing and maintaining a project website and associated social media sites are common aspects of many community information projects, yet foundations frequently lack the capacity and expertise to do this work well. Finding the right partner with technological experience is therefore critical to project success. In this context, corporations can play an extremely valuable role in supporting the use of new technology in a foundation's community information efforts.



### Corporation Partner Example



#### Activity

Develop a community engagement platform, *Dubuque 2.0*, that integrates IBM's metering technology with community engagement to increase environmentally friendly behaviors

The **Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque** is supporting the development of a citizen engagement platform - *Dubuque 2.0* - that engages residents by connecting them with information about sustainability in their homes, workplace and city. The project builds on the city's broader *Smarter Sustainable Dubuque* initiative, for which IBM (corporate) is piloting water and energy monitoring (i.e., metering) technology. Through the foundation's heightened focus on sustainability, it has developed a valuable partnership with IBM. The foundation helps educate and engage the community through in-person outreach and marketing of its *Dubuque 2.0* website. IBM has developed the web-based tool to monitor the water and energy activity in homes, provides the metering technology and contributes evaluation expertise to determine how and to what extent residents' sustainability practices change. The foundation's engagement has contributed to successful uptake in the use of metering technology in Dubuque homes and increased awareness of sustainability issues and outcomes among residents. Milind Naphade, Program Director at IBM Research explains how the corporate-foundation relationship adds value to the work saying, *"The way technology is designed to be used and the way it actually gets used by people may be different. Dubuque is a living lab for us. The grassroots engagement, which the community foundation and its nonprofit partners provide, helps us understand and design the most effective ways by which technology will help people achieve their goals."* IBM hopes to disseminate this technology to more cities across the country as it refines its technology and web-based tools.

Universities have also supported the development and implementation of new technologies to inform and engage communities. Strong university partners understand the importance of applying technology to meet community needs. University partnerships add value to information projects by attracting expert faculty who are familiar with the cycle of product development, testing, and improvement. In addition, technology development and maintenance can be expensive, so a partnership with a university may reduce some costs by utilizing students as human resources.



## University Partner Example



### Activity

Develop a data visualization platform for use by nonprofit organizations with the help of technology experts and students at a local university

In Massachusetts, the **Greater Lowell Community Foundation** has partnered with several other foundations and the University of Massachusetts Lowell to create an easy-to-use data visualization tool for nonprofits and government agencies called *Weave*. The university has provided the developers and programmers to create the platform, and the foundation has served as a coordinator between the university and local nonprofits. The partnership with University of Massachusetts Lowell, has helped the foundation access technology expertise and has provided a low-cost way to pilot the tool before it went live by having graduate students and foundations use and test the platform's functionality. In turn, the university has benefited from being part of a national effort to enhance the data visualization capabilities of nonprofits. Today, students get hands-on experience by applying classroom learning on a tool with real-world applications.

### Tips

#### Partnering to Develop and Maintain Technology

- > Make sure that your technology partner understands and shares your project goals to ensure that the product is designed with the right functionality.
- > Look for opportunities to use partners to pilot new information projects cheaply before making big investments. When appropriate, leverage research and technological capacity available from universities' students.

# Principles for Building and Maintaining Effective Partnerships

Identifying the right partners for the tasks that need to get done is not enough. While not every partnership is always smooth sailing, many foundations have successfully managed to overcome partnership challenges. Across many different types of collaborations, foundations highlight three partnership principles that have led to their success. Whether a partnership is just being formed or it is in need of troubleshooting, foundations should seek to:

- 1. Build on existing efforts, rather than create information tools and resources from scratch**
- 2. Develop a clear understanding of expectations and responsibilities at the outset**
- 3. Formalize the partnership as appropriate to get the necessary level of commitment**

In the following sections, we provide several examples of partnerships that helped foundations get their projects off the ground and ultimately achieve project success. We've also highlighted tips throughout to help others think about how they can develop their own effective partnerships in each area.

## 1. Build on Existing Efforts

*"I would encourage foundations to be proactive in connecting their grantees to other groups working on similar regional campaigns, so that efforts can be collaborative and not duplicative."*

– Mary Lou Fulton, The California Endowment

Many of the information projects that foundations support are new efforts for their community. As a result, many foundations think they need to create a new website or develop a tool from scratch. However, community foundations have found that aligning a new information project with the work of existing organizations keeps them from reinventing the wheel, providing valuable insight into what is working and what needs to change, as well as reducing start-up time.



### Media Partner Example



#### Activity

Leverage a program model to launch youth-led media outlets in communities where the Endowment has significant investments

*Youth-led Media Outlets* developed by New America Media and **The California Endowment** are building on the goals, expertise and partnerships that both organizations have in place across California. The California Endowment, the state's largest health foundation, has introduced local nonprofits in four communities to its partner, New America Media, to ensure that each youth-serving organization will be connected to the information project as it grows. Program officers have participated in community meetings with all of the local organizations to help facilitate the relationship and ensure that the unique needs in each community were well understood from the start. New America Media, with its experience in both youth and ethnic media, is working with Endowment partners and grantees to recruit young journalists, offer training and tell stories about community health from the perspective of young people. The program model for *Youth-led Media Outlets* has now been adopted in each community and is being monitored by New America Media staff. The community partnerships have leveraged significant experience and expertise, even collecting new story ideas from one community to use in the next. *Youth-led Media Outlets* are enriching local news and information ecosystems with fresh stories and new ideas that are helping to build healthier communities.

For some information projects, it can be particularly helpful to build on existing efforts with organizations that have an established journalism presence.



### Media Partner Example



#### Activity

Develop partnership with organizations that have journalism expertise and on-the-ground presence to enable *Write for Arkansas* to shorten its start-up time

**Arkansas Community Foundation** sought to address a decline in local news coverage in rural areas of the state. Recognizing the need for partners that understood the journalism industry and the state's news outlets, the foundation created *Write for Arkansas*, a journalism fellowship modeled after the national Teach for America program, in partnership with the Arkansas Press Association (APA). Through the project, each *Write for Arkansas* partner newspaper received funding to hire an additional reporter to provide in-depth coverage of local issues. With member newspapers across the state, the APA supplied the journalism expertise and on-the-ground perspectives that were needed to get the project up and running quickly. The existing communications infrastructure among this group would have taken the foundation years to develop on its own. As one foundation representative recalls, "*One of the greatest successes of this program was partnering with people who were already experts in community journalism. We were able to get a much quicker return on our investment by supporting organizations that already had an infrastructure in place.*"

## 2. Understand Expectations and Responsibilities at the Outset

*“Spend more time up front developing your partnership by clearly articulating each organization’s roles and responsibilities, as well as an understanding of what the other partners want to get out of the project.”*

– Candace Winkler, Alaska Community Foundation

Communicating the expectations, roles and responsibilities at the beginning of a project can help get a partnership off to a good start. This is especially important when partnerships are being formed between organizations that have not previously collaborated or when those organizations have different cultural norms. The starkest examples of the challenges partners face occur when foundations partner with media outlets or technology developers for the first time.

### What to Expect: Some Potential Differences in Partners’ Cultural Norms

- **Newsrooms** are fast-paced environments where every moment in a 24/7 news cycle is consumed by research, interviews and reporting deadlines; they expect editorial independence.
- **Technology developers** work on a long time horizon but iterate in short cycles; they work on contract and offer less flexibility in adjusting project scope on a fixed budget.
- **Foundations** need to involve community stakeholders when making big decisions; it may take weeks or months of planning before implementation can begin.

Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings. Media partners may seem to foundations overly concerned about issues like having control over who gets invited to speak at community events. Foundations may seem unconcerned about a project’s financial needs when insisting that content should be available to the community free-of-charge. Technology partners may not know how to make key development decisions accessible to foundation staff and others who need to be involved in decision-making. Foundations may not be familiar with the language and processes of web development and therefore are ill-prepared to negotiate the cost of technology services effectively.

Having conversations about values, roles, and responsibilities at the beginning of a partnership and revisiting these topics on a regular basis can help foundations and their partners resolve conflict before major problems occur. Partners should be transparent and honest about cultural differences. As Josie Heath of **The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County** says, *“As a community foundation leader, I love that folks from the journalism world understand deadlines and message. ... I think there is a tendency for us to wallow in our work and have endless meetings and think about the broader issues, but the folks from the journalism world are really about, ‘what is the headline here and what are we going to do about it?’”*



## Media Partner Example



### Activity

Support a start-up news outlet as an interested investor, while respecting the outlet's editorial independence

The **Community Foundation of New Jersey** helped to create *New Jersey Spotlight*, a start-up online news organization covering policy issues from the state house to communities. When the *NJ Spotlight* team approached the foundation for seed funding, the foundation made it clear that their role was going to be as an investor in the organization's launch, much like a venture capitalist. The foundation's trustee and president took a seat on *NJ Spotlight's* board; *NJ Spotlight's* publisher reports quarterly on the organization's progress toward financial sustainability. Soon after launch, *NJ Spotlight* ran a story that raised some concerns at the foundation. A candid conversation between the foundation and *NJ Spotlight's* team strengthened an agreement to ensure *NJ Spotlight's* editorial independence. Ultimately, the two parties agreed that the foundation could offer ideas and suggestions for news coverage, but it would not have a direct say in how specific stories were covered day to day. Both parties saw this moment as a positive partnership interaction and overcame the challenge in part because they shared a vision for the project's success.

## 3. Formalize the Partnership When Appropriate

Building and maintaining partnerships can be a complex, time-consuming activity, but not all partners require the same degree of attention. Some partnerships may require a formal arrangement or contractual agreement, whereas others partners may be informal, built upon a trusted relationship and mutual understanding of each partner's role and responsibility. The appropriate structure for a partnership depends on the purpose of the partnership and the organizational capacity of the foundation and its partners.

Foundations most commonly establish a formal partnership (e.g., through a grant agreement or legal contract) when a partner is primarily charged with implementing the community information project. For example, the **Arkansas Community Foundation** created grant agreements with each of its media partners and required them to report on their activities and their fellows' experiences as part of *Write for Arkansas*. Similarly, partnerships with media organizations to create and/or distribute content are usually formal. For example, distribution partners are usually asked to attribute news stories to the original sources (e.g., with a by-line). *I-News* (supported by **The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County**) has begun to establish contracts with some of its media partners, who can pay an annual fee to receive access to a certain number of investigative news stories. **Silicon Valley Community Foundation** established a contract with the local NPR affiliate, KQED, to run a series of news stories related to their regional planning project, *YouChoose Bay Area*, as a component of the project's public education campaign. Projects with an emphasis on community engagement and empowering citizens to act often convene a steering or advisory committee, as a formal way to structure for dialogue and collaboration across sectors.

Informal partnerships are collaborations or affiliations that may be less frequent and therefore do not need to be bound by a legal or contractual agreement. Informal partnerships may include participating in one-time events or sharing “one-off” content with partner audiences and marketing the project to others in the community. For example, **San Antonio Area Foundation** partnered with the nonprofit Generation Texas in May 2011 to create content on *NOWCastSA.org* about local high school students’ college acceptances. Webcasts of GenTX’s College Signing Day event were recorded and archived on the foundation’s project website for community residents.

Most community foundations have chosen to develop both formal and informal partnerships. The type of structure and level of formality depends on the purpose of the partnership and the capacity of the partnering organization.



### Nonprofit Partner Example



#### Activity

**Build on the work of community-based nonprofits in six Detroit neighborhoods to reach youth and distribute content to the communities**

*Our Life in the D (OLiD)*, a project of the advocacy organization Michigan’s Children and the Detroit-based **Skillman Foundation**, has developed both formal and informal partnerships. Formal partnerships were developed with the Charles Wright Museum of African American History and the downtown YMCA, which provide broadcast media training for youth connected to community organizations in six Detroit neighborhoods that also receive Skillman funding. These six neighborhoods are critical to the broader work of Skillman Foundation, so the formal partnerships help ensure that critical project activities get implemented. In addition, the project has established an informal partnership with the nonprofit media organization Detroit Regional News Hub, which helps reporters from outside of Detroit better understand the city’s strengths, as well as challenges. The Hub routinely includes young *OLiD* reporters in many of its events and helps connect the teens with professional journalists for advice and mentoring.

### Formal/Informal partnerships are a good idea when...

#### Formal Partnerships

(e.g., contracts, MOUs, advisory committees)

- Partnership is vital to core project activity and reaching your goals
- Money or key resources (e.g., staff time, underwriting) are being shared or exchanged
- Protecting the project’s intellectual capital is a high priority (e.g., partnerships involving sharing content between multiple media partners)
- Commitment and buy-in from partners is integral to project success
- You need a partner’s endorsement of the project

#### Informal Partnerships

(e.g., verbal agreements, one-time collaboration)

- Core project activity is not directly or greatly affected by the partnership
- Other partners or organizations can provide support or resources if a partner does not deliver
- Your relationship with the organization is new and an informal partnership is considered a way to get more familiar with their work
- A good working relationship with the partner has already been established through interaction in other contexts, which can be leveraged for this project



## Conclusion

Community and place-based foundations have many opportunities to develop partnerships when designing and implementing community information projects. As we have seen, there are a host of community partners that can help foundations effectively create and curate information, distribute content, conduct outreach, and develop and maintain technology. Identifying the right partnership for the activity requires a sound understanding of the foundation's needs, the community's assets, compatibility with a potential partner, and the appropriate management structure. For any partnership, we see foundations adopting three key guiding principles for their partnerships: building on existing efforts, understanding expectations and responsibilities from the outset, and formalizing partnerships when appropriate.

As foundations look to a wider set of actors to carry out information and media related activities, including organizations that they may have never collaborated with in the past (e.g., web developers, media outlets), their networks will grow. These newfound relationships can provide foundations with opportunities to strengthen their community leadership and enhance their ability to use digital media tools.

In addition, each of the examples represents an opportunity for peer learning. We have learned a great deal from the foundations that have participated in the Knight Community Information Challenge. We hope that this report inspires foundations to continue to share what they have learned with their colleagues and be a valuable participant and partner to information projects in their communities.

## About

The **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation** advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers once owned newspapers. Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote informed and engaged communities and lead to transformational change. The Knight Community Information Challenge is part of the foundation's Media Innovation Initiative, a \$100 million plus effort to meet America's information needs. The challenge is a \$24 million contest that helps community and place-based foundations find creative ways to use new media and technology to keep residents informed and engaged.

For more information on the challenge, visit [informationneeds.org](http://informationneeds.org)

**FSG** is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the globe – partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits and governments to develop more effective solutions to the world's most challenging issues. FSG brings together leaders that are hungry to exchange information, elevate learning and to create collective impact in discovering better ways to solve the world's most difficult social problems.

In the field of learning and evaluation, FSG has significant client and thought leadership experience. FSG's approach focuses on the use of evaluation as a management tool to improve decision making and increase social impact. We use traditional as well as innovative data-collection approaches to determine the various effects and impacts an organization's efforts have produced over time – always with the purpose of informing and improving strategy and program implementation.

For more information, visit [fsg.org](http://fsg.org)

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