

Investing \$100 million for the future of journalism

# Seeding innovation that fosters journalism in our communities, Knight challenges everyone for a better democracy

By DORIAN BENKOIL | When David Cohn applied for a \$170,000 News Challenge grant to support his investigative journalism startup for a year, Knight Foundation president Alberto Ibarguen told him to double his request.

“He looked at me with eyes like saucers,” Ibarguen recalls.

But Ibarguen, talking to Cohn at last year’s We Media conference, knew that to launch the ambitious startup -- a Web site called Spot.Us where journalists pitch ideas and anyone can log on and contribute to help get it produced -- it would take more than a year.

Cohn says that while technologists on the awards committee loved the concept, the journalists “vomited on the table,” afraid of what might happen if a reporter produced work with no oversight from an editor. But Knight decided to take the risk. “They are genuinely interested in experimentation right now, which is exactly what journalism needs,” Cohn says.

At a time when local newspapers are slashing staff and circulation, when local TV and radio are equally challenged, when blogs are trying to find ways to support the journalism that serves local communities, Knight is pushing hard to fulfill its mission to “to ensure that each community’s citizens get the information they need to thrive in a democracy.”



## GAME CHANGER 09 CASE STUDY

***Knight Foundation*** for changing its own approach and everyone else’s. Shifting its focus and funding to media innovation and the information needs of communities, Knight seeds the rethinking of news media and media policy in a connected society that is expressing democracy in new ways.

The foundation is this year giving out some \$5 million of its \$2 billion endowment for News Challenge grants. Last year's awards include \$350,000 to Tim Berners-Lee, often called the inventor of the Web, and colleague Martin Moore to come up with a way for technology do the kinds of fact checking traditionally done by copy editors; \$837,000 to Printcasting, a Bakersfield, Ca.-based attempt to help local news operations become economically viable by creating niche publications supported by ads; and \$15,000 each to two bloggers, one working to empower citizen journalists, another providing digital information to rural areas that don't have Internet access.

Knight programs have invested \$100 million in media initiatives over the past three years to change the game well beyond local journalism. \$20 million has gone to building the Knight Center for Digital Excellence, which provides resources and consulting for communities striving to improve their use of digital media. Millions more have been spent in the past two years to encourage discussion of national media policy, educate journalists and, most recently, inspire community foundations to launch their own information initiatives to better inform their local populaces.

Knight is also spurring use of new technologies, focusing this year on a contest to foster the use of Twitter and has started discussions with gamers including areacode8.com, a website that uses games to help solve social programs. The foundation's focus on digital media under Ibarguen comes from "belief that in this day and age, if you're not digital you're a second class citizen," Ibarguen says. "socially, informationally, and economically." Toward the end of last year, Ibarguen promised publicly that the foundation would continue to invest strongly throughout 2009 despite the economic downturn.

Dan Pacheco, who applied for, won and is administering the Printcast grant, is as effusive as Cohn in his praise for how the foundation lets him develop the idea without breathing down his neck. Knight "feels more like a technology incubator program than a typical grant," he says. "I think people will look back and say, 'Journalism may not have survived if it hadn't been for the Knight Foundation and the Knight News Challenge' It really is that powerful."

**Knight Foundation**  
[www.knightfoundation.org](http://www.knightfoundation.org)

A national foundation with local roots that seeks opportunities that can transform both communities and journalism, and help them reach their highest potential. The foundation wants to ensure that each community's citizens get the information they need to thrive in a democracy. They ask, as they evaluate opportunities and grants, "Is this truly transformational?"



*Alberto Ibarguen,  
president Knight Foundation,  
at We Media Miami 2008*