Informing COMMUNITIES

Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age

THE REPORT OF

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The Report of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy

Foreword

The idea of a high-level commission to examine the information needs of 21st Century American citizens and communities originated at an Aspen Institute forum in the summer of 2007.

Participants in that discussion noted both the spread of digital technology and that, in a democracy, information is a core community need. There was also a sense that people with digital tools and skills have distinct political, social and economic advantage over those without them, as do the roughly 60 percent of Americans who have broadband access over those in rural areas or the poor who do not.

Finally, we were beginning to realize that people with digital access have a new attitude toward information. Instead of passively receiving it, digital users expect to own the information, actively engaging with it, responding, connecting. In sum, they expect to be able to act on and with it in an instant.

The thesis evolved that technology was changing attitudes toward information in basic, critically important ways, but that free flow of all sorts of information continued to be as critical as ever to the core of democracy. We proposed a commission to inquire into the nature of this change and suggest a way, or ways, forward.

In April of 2008, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Aspen Institute announced the formation of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy. Rather than on media, the Knight Commission would focus on communities, in the places where people live and work. The Commission was given a deceptively simple charge:

1. Articulate the information needs of a community in a democracy,

2. Describe the state of things in the United States, and

3. Propose public policy directions that would help lead us from where we are today to where we ought to be.

The result is not standard fare and we are delighted. This report focuses on the information people actually need, and works back from there, suggesting ways that the flow of information and its uses may be enhanced. That is a fundamentally different approach from traditional media policy that sought to promote or regulate existing media. Since the current pace of information technology change is rapid to the point of defying regularization or regulation, the Commission's approach is to steer to the true north of what is constant, the need for the free flow of information in a democracy.

Nothing in this report is meant to be prescriptive. Everything in this report is meant to propose and encourage debate.

Nevertheless, vision emanates from core values and it seems to us axiomatic that access to information is essential, while definition of what is valuable information is open to debate. Therefore, if there is no access to information, there is a denial to citizens of an element required for participation in the life of the community. That is as real politically (in denying voters information about candidates and issues) as it is socially (consider digital social networks) and economically (in a world where entry level job applications at MacDonald's or Wal-Mart must be made online, denial of digital access equals denial of opportunity).

What is a government to do? We think there is a lesson in the administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Abraham Lincoln. They understood the need to connect the nation and did it, using the latest, popular technology. In the middle of the Civil War, the nation embarked on the construction of the transcontinental railroad, linking east and west for commerce and development. Post-World War II, Eisenhower caused to be built the United States Interstate Highway System, allowing the connection of the entire nation by car and truck.

Lincoln did not ask if people travelled for pleasure or commerce. Eisenhower did not care whether you drove a Cadillac or Ford. They cared that the nation be connected and that is our lesson. In the area of communications today, there is no greater role for public bodies, whether White House, Congress or state and local legislatures, than to invest in the creation of universal broadband access for all Americans, regardless of wealth or age, no matter that they live in rural or urban communities. Enabling the building of a national, digital broadband infrastructure and ensuring universal access is a great and proper role for government.

The Knight Commission further proposes that we take as national policy the strengthening of the capacity of individuals to engage with that information. Access is the beginning; education and training, public engagement and government transparency logically follow. Many variations on these themes are suggested here as the beginning of a national debate.

A final note: journalism matters. While the Knight Commission did not set out to "save" journalism, and its focus is on communications more generally, there is a clear understanding that we must find sustainable models that will support the kind of journalism that has informed Americans. The fair, accurate, contextual search for truth is a value worth preserving.

In constructing the Knight Commission, we purposely did not choose a panel of "experts." While we sought diversity of views, the size of the group meant that we would not have full representation from every corner, though we tried to correct for that through a wide range of witnesses at hearings. We are grateful to them and to the staff because what we got is what we wanted: an insightful report by a panel of 15 thoughtful Americans that we hope will generate healthy debate for the benefit of our democracy.

Alberto Ibargüen
President and CEO
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Walter Isaacson
President and CEO
The Aspen Institute

Executive Summary

The time has come for new thinking and aggressive action to dramatically improve the information opportunities available to the American people, the information health of the country's communities, and the information vitality of our democracy.

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy believes America is at a critical juncture in the history of communications. Information technology is changing our lives in ways that we cannot easily foresee. As dramatic as the impacts have been already, they are just beginning.

The digital age is creating an information and communications renaissance. But it is not serving all Americans and their local communities equally. It is not yet serving democracy fully. How we react, individually and collectively, to this democratic shortfall will affect the quality of our lives and the very nature of our communities.

America needs "informed communities," places where the information ecology meets people's personal and civic information needs. This means people have the news and information they need to take advantage of life's opportunities for themselves and their families. They need information to participate fully in our system of self-government, to stand up and be heard. Driving this vision are the critical democratic values of openness, inclusion, participation, empowerment, and the common pursuit of truth and the public interest.

To achieve this, the Commission urges that the nation and its local communities pursue three ambitious objectives:

- **Maximize the availability of relevant and credible *information* to all Americans and their communities;**
- **Strengthen the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information; and**
- **Promote individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.**

Public testimony before the Commission showed that America's communities have vast information needs. Those needs are being met unequally, community by community. Some populations have access to local news and other relevant information through daily newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, local cable news channels, hyper-local Web sites, services that connect to police reports and other sources of local information, blogs, and mobile alerts. Others are unserved or are woefully underserved.

Information is as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools and public health.

Local journalistic institutions that have traditionally served democracy by promoting values of openness, accountability, and public engagement are themselves in crisis from financial, technological, and behavioral changes taking place in our society. Even before the 2008 recession, many news organizations faced shrinking audiences and declining advertising revenue. With the recession, they are struggling even more. There is plainly reason to be anxious about the consequences for local journalism, and therefore for local democratic governance.

Technologies for acquiring and disseminating news and information are changing rapidly. Emerging media have become amazing forces for enabling people to connect. But their full potential is not yet realized in the service of geographic communities, the physical places where people live and work.

America's information needs are yet more urgent because of the economic recession of 2008. But such crises often create opportunity, and the Commission believes the current moment marks a time of great possibility.

It is a moment of technological opportunity. Experiments in social communication abound. The advent of the Internet and the proliferation of mobile media are unleashing a torrent of innovation in the creation and distribution of information. Those who possess and know how to use sophisticated computing devices interact ever more seamlessly with a global information network both at home and in public.

It is also a moment of journalistic and political opportunity. Information organizations, including many traditional journalistic enterprises, are embracing new media in unique and powerful ways, developing new structures for information dissemination and access. Political leaders and many government agencies are staking out ambitious agendas for openness. The potential for using technology to create a more transparent and connected democracy has never seemed brighter.

At this juncture, muddled strategies and bad choices will result in missed opportunities for society. Mistakes can reinforce existing inequalities and worsen second-class status for people who lack the resources, skills or understanding required in the digital age. Clear strategies and smart choices can produce a revolution in civic engagement, government openness and accountability, and economic prosperity.

The Commission believes that achieving its vision of informed communities requires pursuing three fundamental objectives:

- **Maximizing the availability of relevant and credible *information* to communities.** The availability of relevant and credible information implies creation, distribution, and preservation. Information flow improves when people have not only direct access to information, but the benefit also of credible intermediaries to help discover, gather, compare, contextualize, and share information.
- **Strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information.** This includes the ability to communicate one's information, creations and views to others. Attending to *capacity* means that people have access to the tools they need and opportunities to develop their skills to use those tools effectively as both producers and consumers of information.
- **Promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.** Promoting engagement means generating opportunities and motivation for involvement. Citizens should have the capacity, both individually and in groups, to help shoulder responsibility for community self-governance.

Information is as vital to the healthy functioning of communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools, and public health. People have not typically thought of information in this way, but they should. Just as the United States has built other sectors of its vital infrastructure through a combination of private enterprise and social investment, Americans should look to a similar combination of strategies in developing its information infrastructure as well.

Information is essential to community vitality. Informed communities can effectively coordinate activities, achieve public accountability, solve problems, and create connections. Local information systems should support widespread knowledge of and participation in the community's day-to-day life by all segments of the community. To achieve the promise of democracy, it is necessary that the creation, organization, analysis, and transmission of information include the whole community.

In addition to the information necessary to participate in elections and civic affairs, people need access to information to better their lives. Where families struggle to make ends meet and many men and women work multiple jobs, free time is limited. Indeed, the path to active civic engagement may begin with fulfillment of basic information needs, including information about jobs, housing, taxes, safety, education, transportation, recreation, entertainment, food, shopping, utilities, child care, health care, religious resources, and local news.

A community is a healthy democratic community—it is an "informed community"—when:

- **People have convenient access to both civic and life-enhancing information, without regard to income or social status.**
- **Journalism is abundant in many forms and accessible through many convenient platforms.**
- **Government is open and transparent.**
- **People have affordable high-speed Internet service wherever and whenever they want and need it.**
- **Digital and media literacy are widely taught in schools, public libraries and other community centers.**
- **Technological and civic expertise is shared across the generations.**
- **Local media—including print, broadcast, and online media—reflect the issues, events, experiences and ideas of the entire community.**
- **People have a deep understanding of the role of free speech and free press rights in maintaining a democratic community.**
- **Citizens are active in acquiring and sharing knowledge both within and across social networks.**
- **People can assess and track changes in the information health of their communities.**

Another insight that emerged from the Commission's study: journalistic institutions do not need saving so much as they need creating. Both private and public investments are needed to exploit this moment of journalistic opportunity fully.

Original and verified reporting is critical to community information flow. The challenge is not to preserve any particular medium or any individual business, but to promote the traditional public-service functions of journalism. Rather than ask how to save newspapers, a better question is, "How can we advance quality, skilled journalism that contributes to healthy information environments in local communities?"

The Commission applauds efforts throughout the country to find new solutions and business models to preserve valued journalistic institutions and create new ones. There is a transition underway requiring fresh thinking and new approaches to the gathering and sharing of news and information.

The Commission has formulated 15 strategies for pursuing the three fundamental objectives of information availability, citizen capacity, and public engagement. The recommendations propose action by government, communities, the media, and citizens. The following are condensed versions of those recommendations.

What are the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy?

Community Functions Depend on Information and Exchange

American democracy is organized largely by geography, which is why the Commission has focused primarily on the needs of geographically defined communities.[9] Local communities need to accomplish at least four things that depend on information.

- Communities need to ***coordinate***. Activities like elections, emergency responses, and even community celebrations succeed only if everyone knows where to be at what time and what role to play. This requires a system of information and exchange. Information is also the central resource in enabling the creation of economic and social connections that build a community's capacity for action.
- Communities need to ***solve problems***. They have to identify goals, challenges, and options for response on everything from building the local economy, to improving the performance of community schools, to protecting health and safety and combating local hunger. They have to estimate the consequences of alternative approaches. They have to weigh those consequences in light of community values. All of this requires information, interpretation, analysis, and debate.
- Communities need to establish systems of ***public accountability***. Public officials answer to voters for their performance in office. Voters need information and analysis to assess how officials are doing their jobs.
- Finally, communities need to develop ***a sense of connectedness***. They need to circulate ideas, symbols, facts, and perspectives in a way that lets people know how they fit into a shared narrative. A community's system of meaning evolves as new voices and new experiences enter the information flow. People need access to that information to avoid feeling alienated and excluded.

Communal and Personal Needs Intersect

Communities can fulfill their key functions only through the individuals who live there. This means that the information needs of any local community are inevitably connected to the personal information needs of its people.

To begin with, people have to be able to meet their personal and family needs in ways that leave time and energy available for community issues. Then, for community processes to work, people require information that relates directly to participating in public life.

Moreover, the streams of personal and civic information shape each other. In many cases, news about the larger community may be essential to helping people fulfill their personal objectives. Conversely, as people work on their individual goals, they see the links between their personal lives and the public life of their communities. The civic and the personal are inescapably intertwined.

The citizen's information needs are both civic and personal.

The Commission's emphasis on democracy reinforces this insight. At a minimum, democracy means self-governance in a political system protective of liberty and equality. In its deepest version, however, democracy means something more. It connotes a commitment to individual freedom in daily life. It means opportunity to pursue one's personal goals and objectives, within the law, however one chooses. The citizen's information needs are both civic and personal.

Envisioning and Measuring Success and Failure

In a perfect world, citizens could reliably measure their information needs and gauge their satisfaction. Community members could quantify the assets of their local information ecology. Researchers could correlate information assets with positive social outcomes. Citizens and their representatives could formulate recommendations to improve social outcomes by making specific, measurable improvements in information handling.

However, information researchers have not developed the tools to perform these tasks with precision. The Commission has viewed international efforts at such indexing with interest.[10] It has looked at efforts to create tools that would be useful locally to assess a community's information ecology.[11] Such efforts do not yet enable us to measure information flow successfully or relate that flow to other community outcomes.

Millions of Americans meet their information needs through broadband service and home computers or Web-enabled mobile phones. At their desks or just walking their neighborhoods, they have access to more information than many nations hold in all the books in their national libraries. Today's information consumers can pull together the news they want to follow in a convenient Web page. They can apply online for a job, a loan, or college admission. They can check their children's school lunch options and keep track of homework assignments. Before they go to the doctor, they can arm themselves with information from health Web sites or online support groups. They do not overdraw their bank accounts because they can check balances online and move funds from one account to another. They pay bills efficiently without ever using a postage stamp.

Against this baseline, it is easy to describe what failure looks like. For individuals, failure is the inability to apply for jobs online. Failure is the inability to get relevant health information. Failure is not being able to take advantage of online educational opportunities or use online tools to track the education of one's children. Millions of Americans lack the tools or the skills to match their information-rich contemporaries in pursuing personal goals. The freedom they enjoy to shape their own lives and destiny is stunted. These people are falling into second-class citizenship. This is true even putting aside the actual civic activities that online connectedness makes possible. Even if they want to engage in the public affairs of their communities, the navigation of life's daily mundane tasks requires disproportionate time and energy. This is not democracy at work.

In terms of community coordination, failure looks like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. People know of dangers but do not organize in response to them. When emergencies strike, information systems break down. People do not know where to find food, shelter, health care and basic safety.

In terms of community problem-solving, failure is the proliferation of problems unaddressed. Downtowns dry up. Pollution spreads. Employers leave. Unemployment climbs. Dropout rates increase. Public health problems intensify.

A community without public accountability suffers from unresponsive government. Neglect is common, corruption all too plausible. Money is wasted as government officials are slow and awkward at doing what other governments do quickly and nimbly. Voter turnout is low, not because people are satisfied, but because people are resigned.

A community without a sense of connectedness is a group of people who know too little about one another. Social distrust abounds. Alienation is common. Everyone assumes that somebody else is getting "a better shake." The community loses out on the talents of people who lack either the opportunity or motivation to share

their skills. When problems arise, there is little common ground to solve them. People feel excluded, that they are not "part of the action," and they disconnect from one another.

Engagement Involves Both Information and Information Intermediaries

Part of what is missing in these sketches of individual and community failure is information. But the problem is not the lack of information; it is an absence of engagement—personal involvement with the larger community based on accurate and timely information.

Unless people, armed with information, engage with their communities to produce a positive effect, information by itself is powerless.

Information alone does not guarantee positive outcomes. Consider one famous example. A front-page story in the June 8, 2004, *Times-Picayune*[12] in New Orleans detailed a near-stoppage in the work needed to shore up the city's levees. The mere revelation of that information in itself did not mobilize the effort that might have spared the city the worst ravages of Hurricane Katrina 14 months later. Interested or influential people did not engage with the information in timely, effective ways. Unless people, armed with information, engage with their communities to produce a positive effect, information by itself is powerless.

Engagement is the critical point where community and individual information needs intersect. Communities need policies, processes, and institutions that promote information flow and support people's constructive engagement with information and with each other.

A community's information ecology works best when people have easy, direct and timely access to the information they need. Many communities are developing online systems to access a variety of public records. Information aggregators use tools to help people quickly find the relevant records and data. Among the more exciting developments is increasing online availability of all kinds of public data, not just conventional "records." Initiatives like these enable private and nonprofit

entrepreneurs to use existing government information as the basis for new businesses and civic projects. The sharing of data can also improve the quality, accountability and efficiency of government.

Direct access to information, however, is not a complete solution to a community's needs because *information can overwhelm*. Emerging technologies may help people sift, organize and evaluate information. But even tech-savvy individuals are unlikely to possess the institutional resources they need to meet all their personal information needs and objectives without help. No individual can generate all the analysis, debate, context and interpretation necessary to turn raw information into useful knowledge.

Thus, just as communities depend on citizens for engagement, individuals depend on formal and informal institutions for support to engage with information. The local daily newspaper is one such intermediary. So are local television and radio newsrooms. Some support comes from private enterprise. Public and nonprofit institutions can also function as intermediaries, sometimes through face-to-face programming, sometimes via Web sites. Family, friends and co-workers can be intermediaries. But the key point is simple: effective, trusted intermediaries help people engage with information.

Journalism Is a Critical Intermediating Practice

Individuals and communities depend on news as a critical element of the information ecology, and effective intermediaries are critical in gathering and disseminating news.

The 1947 Hutchins Commission Report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, defined news as "truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account[s] of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning."[13] The best journalism serves the interests of truth by reporting as fact only what can be verified through multiple trusted sources.

News can be life-enhancing. It can be decisive to individuals in their personal affairs. Local, national and international events can point the way to important challenges and opportunities. News can affect decisions that are both mundane and essential to personal well-being: where the Board of Education will locate a new school, whether plans are advancing for light rail through city neighborhoods, early reports of a possible flu outbreak at a local community college.

The news also helps people to connect their private and public concerns. It helps them identify and take advantage of opportunities to put issues of personal importance on the public agenda. To serve their individual purposes, people need continual access to news that is credible, verified and up-to-date.

News is also essential for the community as a whole. Community coordination cannot exist without shared news. The dissemination of information, debate and analysis is central to problem solving. The Hutchins Commission emphasized the importance of media's role in projecting a "representative picture of the constituent groups in the society." The news connects subcommunities by letting one neighborhood know what another neighborhood is doing and how the affairs of some affect the fortunes of all.

News promotes accountability. Watergate, the Pentagon Papers, and the 2007 Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal are iconic examples. A 2003 international study showed a strong association between national levels of corruption and the "free circulation of daily newspapers per person." The same investigators found a similar relationship across American states. Government corruption declined in the United States between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Historians identify the development of an information-oriented press as a possible factor.[14]

In the same vein, a 2008 MIT study found that members of Congress who are covered less by their local press work less for their constituencies, as evidenced by lower federal spending in their districts. They vote their party line more often, testify less often before congressional hearings, and appear to serve less frequently on constituency-oriented committees. This research suggests a tie between news coverage, voter awareness, and official responsiveness. Voters living in areas with less coverage of their members of Congress were found to be "less likely to recall their representative's name, and less able to describe and rate them."[15]

In any community, journalists are the primary intermediaries for news. They are the people most systematically engaged in gathering, analyzing and disseminating news. The connection between the potential positive effects of news and the vitality of professional journalism makes sense. Public accountability is an obvious case. People behave better if they think they are being watched. But journalism that is good at watching people in power is hard. It requires training, determination and time. It can also be expensive, especially when the prospects of legal expenses are added to the budget necessary to cover the basic costs of reporting and production.

The journalism of the future may or may not take the familiar form of newspapers. But for true public accountability, communities need skilled practitioners. They ask tough questions. They chase obscure leads and confidential sources. They translate technical matters into clear prose. Where professionals are on the job, the public watchdog is well fed. Part-time, episodic or uncoordinated public vigilance is not the same.

The Commission recognizes that new technologies and techniques can bring more information to light and can complement or substitute for more traditional journalism. This is an evolving process. But in the end, the goals of journalism persist and remain vital. Someone needs to dig up the facts, hold people accountable and disseminate the news.

Information Intermediaries Need Both Private and Public Investment

Effective information intermediaries require resources. But because *information is often a public good*, there are at least two challenges in funding them.

First, information creates what economists call "positive externalities." These are benefits for the public as a whole from which no individual firm can profit. An informed public is likely to be a more engaged public. It is likely to make better decisions and to resolve conflict more productively. Better informed people are more helpful resources to one another. But no one economic actor will invest enough personal resources to achieve these outcomes because the benefits will flow to everyone in the community, not just to the investor.

Much information is also "non-rivalrous." One person's consumption of information does not reduce the amount others can consume. People who do not pay for information can thus make free use of a lot of the information that other people have paid for. This produces a "free rider" problem. People underinvest in information because they suspect that they can benefit, without paying, from the investments of others. (If others read newspapers and share what they learn, why subscribe?)

These facts point to a critical economic consequence: just because communities need journalism does not mean that consumers in the marketplace will generate enough revenue to support that journalism. Specialized publications, whether for investment counseling or restaurant reviews, can be market-supported. But subscriptions alone have never supported and are not likely ever to pay the full cost of gathering and disseminating general local news. In the 20th century, advertising compensated for much of the shortfall because advertisers were willing to pay substantial sums to newspapers and local broadcast stations to reach their audiences. The Internet and the fragmentation of media markets through the proliferation of new outlets have undermined this business model. Adjusted for inflation, newspaper ad revenues fell 31 percent between 2000 and 2007,[16] hitting metropolitan dailies the hardest. These trends clearly call into question how communities and their citizens will pay for news and information in the future.

Because of information's special character, America has a long history of providing social support for the development and transmission of news and information. Beginning in the 18th century, the Postal Service subsidized the delivery of newspapers,[17] and postal subsidies still support nonprofit publications. Congress created and partially funds public radio and public television. Commercial broadcasters have enjoyed protected use of their airwaves at little or no cost. States help to finance schools and colleges, and local communities fund libraries, as forms of social support for the generation and transmission of knowledge.

Public policies need to allow or encourage private market mechanisms to robustly serve community information needs. But because so much information is a public good, communities and the country also need to make some public investments in the creation and distribution of information.

Accordingly, if communities are to enjoy the kind of information ecology that fosters individual and collective success, they will need to pursue a dual course of action. Public policies need to allow or encourage private market mechanisms to robustly serve community information needs. But because so much information is a public good, communities and the country also need to make some public investments in the creation and distribution of information.

Promoting Democratic Values

In sum, a compelling vision for meeting the information needs of communities in a democracy must first take account of the needs of individuals who make up America's communities. It requires attention to the core community functions we have identified, the role of intermediaries, and the economics of information. But it also requires pursuing the values that a democratic information system should serve. In distilling all that it has read and heard, the Commission has come to regard the following five values as paramount here:

1. **Openness.** The information ecology should be maximally available to everyone as a producer and consumer of information and, within the bounds of law, should support the widest possible range of choices for personal lifestyle and civic initiative.

2. **Inclusion.** The information system should reflect the interests, perspectives, and narratives of the entire community; everyone should be able to find information relevant to their needs.

3. **Participation.** The information system should operate to encourage and support people's productive engagement with information for personal and civic purposes.

4. **Empowerment.** Individuals should have the opportunity to pursue their talents, dreams and interests. Communities should be able to govern their own affairs successfully, reflecting the needs and values of their members.

5. **Common Pursuit of Truth and the Public Interest.** People should be able to differentiate what is credible, verifiable and rigorously determined from what is speculative, false or propagandistic. They should also be able to engage with information and each other to develop public decisions that maximize community welfare.

The Commission recognizes that putting these principles into operation is challenging, in large part, because important values often exist in tension with one another. Democratic communities must invariably struggle, for example, with the balance between openness and privacy, and between the freedom of speech and the accountability of speakers. These issues, however, only underscore every citizen's need for the news, information and analysis necessary to participate meaningfully in the public decisions that effectively strike that balance.

The Commission believes that achieving its vision of informed communities requires pursuing three fundamental objectives, each discussed in the following sections of the Commission's report:

- **Maximizing the availability of relevant and credible *information* to Americans and their communities.**
  Availability implies the creation, distribution and preservation of information. In addition to making important public information available directly to individuals, information flow improves when credible intermediaries help people to discover, gather, compare, contextualize and share information.

- **Strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information.**
  Attending to *capacity* means that all people have access to the tools they need and opportunities to develop their skills to use those tools effectively as both producers and consumers of information. Everyone in a democracy should be able to communicate their information, creations and views to others. The Commission envisions actions that expand access to information and communications technologies, create more effective and affordable use of existing technologies, and foster lifelong learning at all levels and in multiple settings.

- **Promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.**
  Promoting *engagement* means generating opportunities and motivation to engage. The Commission envisions actions for engaging young people more deeply in the lives of their communities. It also envisions enabling communities to capitalize on the creativity and technological skills of young people and other segments of the community who may otherwise be overlooked or underengaged. Finally, the Commission encourages actions that empower citizens, both individually and in groups, to assume greater responsibility for community self-governance. This includes local community activism around access to information as a public need.

The Commission believes that the vigorous pursuit of these objectives would help produce what truly deserve to be called "informed communities." In such healthy democratic communities:

- **People have convenient access to both civic and life-enhancing information, without regard to income or social status.**
- **Journalism is abundant in many forms and accessible through many convenient platforms.**
- **Government is open and transparent.**
- **People have affordable high-speed Internet service wherever and whenever they want and need it.**
- **Digital and media literacy are widely taught in schools, public libraries and other community centers.**
- **Technological and civic expertise is shared across generations.**
- **Local media—including print, broadcast, and online media—reflect the full reality of the communities they represent.**
- **People have a deep understanding of the role of free speech and free press rights in maintaining a democratic community.**
- **Citizens are active in acquiring and sharing knowledge both within and across social networks.**
- **People can assess and track changes in the community's information health.**

An informed community would regard the health of its information environment as being as central to community success as the quality of its water system or electrical grid.

It would protect that health by persistent and simultaneous focus on issues of information availability, citizen capacity and public engagement.