

The Banyan Project:

New ownership, new focus for relational journalism

<http://www.banyanproject.org>

A proposal by Thomas Stites
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If a core purpose of journalism is to foster participatory democracy, then journalism must reach and serve all citizens.¹ Yet a recent [Project on Excellence in Journalism study](#) found the American press pays little attention to the economic woes of ordinary people, finding that between Feb. 1 and Aug. 31 of 2009, almost 40% of economic news reports dealt with the trials of the banking and auto industries, while "stories that tried to explicitly examine the broader impact of the economic downturn on the lives of ordinary Americans". ([Full report](#))

The Banyan Project is devoted to creating and making real a wholly new and scalable business model that sidesteps reliance on advertising as the primary revenue stream and thus can thrive in the digital future.

We propose during 2010-2011 to launch in three pre-selected cities -- Boston, Chicago and Kansas City -- a bold experiment in the financing and ownership and execution of professional, trustworthy, relational journalism called *The Banyan Project*.²

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During 2010-2011, we propose to:

- Complete research-in-progress on the co-operative form of ownership and how it may be applied to Banyan communities and to American journalism in general. Perhaps the nation's foremost expert on the co-operative form, Prof. Michael Cook, is at the University of Missouri and so my fellowship would contribute to interdisciplinary initiatives on campus.
- Ripen the idea of institutional-scale journalism on a post-newspaper model that can thrive in the digital future. This has been a real challenge: The future-of-journalism discourse to date has largely had a binary focus, with We've-gotta-save-the-newspapers at one pole and variations of citizen journalism at the other. Banyan fits in neither; it's a third way that draws from both. In addition, Banyan might be an idea pilot for Circlabs, a RJI-related initiative.

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¹ -- [The introduction](#) to the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities, reads, in part:

The information revolution is benefitting those in the middle class and up and, in a different way, many young residents of urban and suburban communities. They have never had greater access to more relevant information. But many Americans are in danger of remaining or becoming second-class citizens in the digital age, whether because of low income, language barriers, lack of access to technology, limited skills and training, community norms, or lack of personal motivation. The poor, the elderly, rural and small town residents, and some young people are most at risk. Those who belong to more than one of these groups are especially vulnerable . . . If the problem were simply "not keeping up" with the latest information technologies and capabilities, the situation would be bad enough. But many people are now losing the information sources they have relied on, as newspapers, TV, and radio reduce news coverage to survive financially. In a democracy, the very idea of second-class citizenship is unacceptable; yet, for many, second-class information citizenship is looming.

² -- An explanation of the Banyan name may be found here. (provide link)

THE SERVICE – RELATIONSHIP JOURNALISM

Democracy's needs are Banyan's bedrock and inspire "relational journalism." This distinctive approach, with editorial judgments grounded in the needs of its reader/ users rather than the thinking of institutions and elites, aims to strengthen democracy through Web techniques that serve, engage and give voice to the civic energy of less-than-affluent everyday citizens. Presently, they are at best ill-served by mainstream journalism. The Banyan public will find its journalism relevant to their lives, respectful of them as people, and worthy of their trust.

Using its distinctive relational approach, the fully realized Banyan will cover the same range of news and service features as mainstream journalism, from the deeply serious to the merely entertaining. And it will adhere to the highest standards of prestige journalism. A fuller explanation of this "relational journalism" approach may be reviewed at the [Banyan Project wiki site](#).

The Banyan Project envisions and is striving to create:

- **An entirely new kind of publishing entity**, a co-op that can scale to meet the needs of the huge but ill-served public of less-than-affluent Americans by providing them with relevant and respectful journalism that nourishes their civic engagement.
- **A primary revenue stream through a nonprofit** whose comprehensive trustworthiness creates value for the Banyan public and inspires hundreds of thousands of them to become co-op members at a modest cost.
- **A Web publishing platform** that invites call-and-response participation that enriches Banyan journalism, holds the editors accountable to its co-op owners, and provides tools to bring its reader/users together and activate their citizenship.
- **A scalable franchise structure** that empowers a profusion of small, entrepreneurial journalistic enterprises to operate in Banyan's platform and appear as a seamless report of hyperlocal, local, national, and foreign news, plus service journalism, all tailored to meet the needs of the Banyan Public from coast to coast.

Because Banyan will be owned by a consumer co-op, whose shareholders will be limited to individual reader/users, the editors will be accountable to the people they serve. This accountability relationship is inherently trustworthy.

OWNERSHIP – THE CO-OP MODEL

Banyan, as a co-op owned by its reader/users, will set the standards for independent franchisee/licensees that produce of original news and service journalism tailored to be relentlessly useful to less-than-affluent Americans, a public increasingly not served by mainstream media. Because Banyan will be owned by a consumer co-op, whose shareholders will be limited to individual reader/users, the editors will be accountable to the people they serve. This accountability relationship is inherently trustworthy.

Banyan will be Web-native and participatory yet institutional rather than blogger-centric, with journalism created by professionals working in networked relationship with reader/users. It will employ not only long-established journalistic forms -- narrative reporting and story telling (but in text rich with links), plus video and still photos -- but also newer forms that work only on the Web, including blogs, Web data extraction technology, databases that are searchable by the public, and routinely crowd-sourcing.

Banyan's daily report will be delivered in whatever form reader/users prefer. It will not only display the day's offerings on its website in the most accessible possible manner but also offer RSS feeds and daily headlines by email in whatever form and at whatever time of day each reader/user wishes.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

- In February, the Banyan Project was selected to be one of three keynote presenters at the WeMedia conference in Miami.
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- A Knight News Fellowship grant proposal seeking \$1.9 million over three years to develop software and launch the community-level pilot sites in Kansas City, Boston and Chicago is pending. Members of Banyan's 26-member board of advisors live in and have extensive contacts in all three cities, and I have deep roots in them as well. An RJI fellowship would allow more resources to be focused at the pilot rather than management level and would build the capacity of the Knight and related funding.
- A 26-member Banyan advisory group includes senior journalists, academics, Web developers, sociologists and researchers, business strategists, financial executives and advocates for strengthening democracy. A full listing, including links to biographies, is in the left rail of all Banyan Web pages.

EXECUTION – WHY BOSTON, CHICAGO, KANSAS CITY

The three cities we've picked for pilot projects are Boston, Chicago and Kansas City. Boston's an obvious choice; I live in Newburyport, Mass., and have ongoing relationships with the Berkman Institute on internet and Society at Harvard, The Boston Foundation and Tom Fiedler, dean of the Boston University School of Communications.

I have really deep community contacts in Kansas City and Chicago from my years at The Star and The Tribune. Two of the newer Banyan advisory board members are Dalene Bradford, a former executive of the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, and Fran Grossman, executive vice president of ShoreBank, the pioneering community development bank. ShoreBank is based in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood -- an ideal African-American community for a Banyan pilot. We expect to approach the Kauffman Foundation as appropriate.

Execution of the Banyan pilot sites will be the work of four task forces:

- The news and features task force is conceptualizing all aspects of news and service features, from the hyperlocal to global in scope, plus the editorial page and the platform that is its intellectual basis.
- The 2.0 community task force is researching the Banyan Public, acquiring co-op members and building relationships with them, encouraging them to organize around issues of mutual concern.
- The technology task force designing the software that will bring Banyan's journalism together seamlessly from widely distributed news entities and publish it -- and will provide 2.0 tools that enable the community to form, engage in Banyan journalism as citizens, join the co-op, and engage with other members to make change.
- The enterprise task force is developing the co-op entity, its administrative structure, fund-raising, and coordinating all aspects of the project, including co-op ownership, franchisee/licensee, sources of revenue and business-risks assessment.

A Banyan community news operation will consist of an editor, two staff reporters, and three interns from the journalism program of a local commuter college or community college, as well as some freelancers, stringers and community volunteers (who must be co-op members).

A BANYAN COMMUNITY SITE -- HOW IT WORKS

Banyan communities will be defined less by political boundaries than by the shared interests of residents, a local application of the technique Joel Garreau used in his still fresh 1989 book, *Nine Nations of North America*. Garreau scrubbed all the political boundaries off the map and drew new ones based on common cultures and economies. Local example: In Boston, the Orange Line subway is a shared experience for many members of the Banyan Public.

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Each site will mix local news, national and foreign and investigative reporting, and service journalism focused on health, money, career guidance, self employment and entertainment. A signature feature will be the The Banyan Index, which will track the economy as less-than-affluent Americans experience it rather than from Wall Street's perspective, mixing economic and social indicators such as access to health care, household income distribution, consumer borrowing, the personal debt-to-asset ratio, and the true jobless rate (which takes discouraged workers into account). It will not only help its readers measure the trajectory of their lives but also attract much attention.

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THE JOURNALISM APPROACH

The Banyan approach to local news is grounded in communities and in people's personal-level concerns, with downtown city hall coverage usually playing only a supporting role. Starring roles in news stories will tend to go to community institutions like local schools -- and only rarely to the school superintendent.

Drawing from an old newsroom adage, Banyan's local approach starts even closer to home. When people wake up, the adage goes, their first thought is, Am I OK? Their second thought is, Is my family OK? Then, Is my community OK? And, finally, Is my country secure? Once all that is processed, people can think about the wider world and its people.

So Banyan, in tune with the human nature the adage expresses, starts its coverage at the experiential, personal/family level, serving each of its reader/users as individually as possible with information that's directly relevant.

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As Banyan matures and gains resources it will expand project reporting whose aim is to keep government honest, what Alex S. Jones, director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, calls "accountability journalism." Banyan journalism will be primarily text, supplemented with still images, video and audio. The devotion to text rests on the commitment to strengthening democracy, in which text has special power.

We will inaugurate "*The Banyan Index*," a socio-economic tracking of the economy as less-than-affluent Americans experience it, mixing economic and social indicators such as access to health care, household income distribution, consumer borrowing, the personal debt-to-asset ratio, and the true jobless rate (which takes discouraged workers into account). It will not only help its readers measure the trajectory of their lives but also attract much attention.

Consistent with its commitment to covering the news from the perspective of its reader/users, Banyan will think not in terms of hyper-local, local, state, national, and foreign news -- categories that largely express newsroom bureaucracies and the locations of institution. Instead it will think in three categories of news based in readers' reality: (1) experiential (the local landfill stinks); (2) issues (lots of landfills stink due to lax state regulations, up one level of abstraction from experiential), and (3) policy and politics (how best to fix the regulations to get rid of the stink, up two levels of abstraction). Banyan will give high priority to experiential coverage at the community level and strive to provide experiential angles and storytelling no matter the topic or where a new story may originate.

THE SOFTWARE APPROACH

Banyan's software will assemble each reader's daily report seamlessly, drawing from the journalistic efforts of many franchisee/licensees -- local reporting groups, others that offer service journalism, others that do investigative reporting -- as well as APIs and Web sources. Initially, Banyan technology will apply to the individual pilot sites and then support a networked, comprehensive news report assembled from the sites.

Banyan's software platform will invite feedback that sets a new standard for both richness and volume; it will also ensure strong public participation in the journalism its professional staff produces. The aim is for editors to have unprecedented capacity to understand what their public needs to know and thus and unprecedented opportunity to serve readers: They'll be able to cover the news in ways that respond to reader/users' expressed wants -- and to know their less-articulated needs well enough to deliver other news they'll find meaningful without knowing they wanted it.

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CONCLUSION

To the extent a disparity between rich and poor grows, coverage dependent upon advertising skews out of practical necessity toward supporting the needs of the affluent. Pay models beyond advertising may foster diversity and inclusiveness -- so long as they are economical and simple. And, too, such models need to allow for a "library pass," so that people are not shut out of all information in all cases merely because of inability to pay. Most if not all of Banyan's reporting will be available free, but co-operative owners will receive other benefits.

[Writing in The Wall Street Journal](#), L. Gordon Crovitz, its former publisher, defended The Journal's paid site by saying, "For years, publishers and editors have asked the wrong question: Will people pay to access my newspaper content on the Web? The right question is: What kind of journalism can my staff produce that is different and valuable enough that people will pay for it online? . . . "People are happy to pay for news and information however it's delivered," Crovitz says, "but only if it has real, differentiated value."

This is exactly Banyan's goal, but for a very different public than *The Wall Street Journal* serves.

ADDENDUM

PILOT PROGRESS -- BOSTON EXAMPLE

A month ago four Banyanites joined me on a bridge line call to open a conversation about what Banyan's pilot site ought to look like. To my delight, a far better idea emerged than any I'd collected from earlier conversations. The participants were Fred Garcia (who facilitated, saving the five of us from my bumbling efforts at same, and who brought his fine strategic mind to the proceedings); citizen journalism master Dan Gillmor; Lauren Walters (the advisory board's newest member, who is a keen observer of emerging media), and Ralph Whitehead (who really knows journalism and really knows Boston and its institutions). The idea that emerged from the call has been extended and refined a bit in subsequent conversations, and now it looks like this:

- 1) We get a map of all the census tracts in the Boston area where most households are in the third to seventh deciles of the income distribution, identifying the Boston-area neighborhoods where the Banyan public lives.
- 2) Once the map is made, we identify all the community service institutions in the third-to-seventh neighborhoods -- community clinics, credit counseling offices, etc. -- and then evaluate them.
- 3) Then we choose a neighborhood or group of neighborhoods with strong and reliable community institutions as the area that the Banyan pilot will serve.
- 4) We enlist the community institutions not only as crucial sources of information for Banyan readers but also as allies in spreading the word about Banyan in the community.
- 5) We figure out what other journalism the pilot should deliver in addition to coverage of health and money issues.
- 6) We figure out what resources will be needed to deliver a quality Banyan product to the pilot Banyan public, do a business plan, raise money, hire people, and launch.