

Evaluation Report

on

J-Lab

The Institute for Interactive Journalism

Submitted to the

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

October 2010

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BACKGROUND

J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism was founded to help news organizations and citizens develop new ideas and use technology creatively to report on public issues. Housed at American University's School of Communication, J-Lab's mission is to improve public life by transforming journalism for today and re-inventing it for tomorrow. The organization supports community and interactive journalism, and manages multiple activities for this purpose.

Key J-Lab projects include:

- *Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism* that reward journalism that involves citizens in public issues (one \$10,000 and multiple \$1,000 awards)
- *New Voices* grants for nonprofit startup community media ventures (\$17,000 grants with the opportunity for \$8,000 in follow-up funding)
- *Networked Journalism (Net-J)* projects that offer small grants to mainstream news outlets to collaborate with community news sites on advertising and content sharing
- *Knight Citizen News Network* (KCNN.org), a self-help training site for traditional journalists, community journalists, and educators on launching community news and information sites
- J-Learning.org, a website with online learning modules to help new media makers build and promote local news sites.¹

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has been a significant and long-time J-Lab funder. To inform its ongoing relationship with J-Lab, the Knight Foundation commissioned a short-term external evaluation of J-Lab to clarify the results J-Lab is trying to achieve, provide data on how J-Lab is doing in achieving its intended results, and identify ways in which J-Lab might improve its work moving forward. The evaluation was designed to be a learning tool, highlighting where J-Lab is performing well and where adjustments might be needed. It also was designed to generate findings about what J-Lab is achieving as a whole, across all of its activities, rather than to examine each activity in-depth.

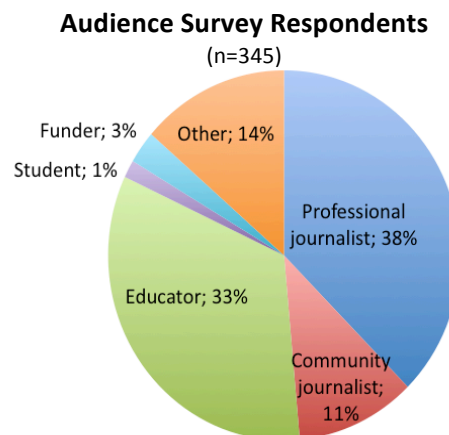
This report begins with a brief description of the evaluation methodology, followed by the theory of change that guided the evaluation. After that, findings are presented, organized around several overarching evaluation questions. The report ends with a summary of main conclusions.

¹ J-Lab also has a New Media Women Entrepreneurs project that supports innovation, recruitment, and retention for women in journalism. Because the Knight Foundation does not fund this project, it was not included in the scope of this evaluation. It is, however, an important part of J-Lab's work.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation took place during September 2010. Four methods were used to gather data.

- **Key informant Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with various “insiders” working in and around J-Lab. Key informants included four J-Lab staff (through a group meeting), two Knight Foundation staff members, and six randomly selected advisors (to the Knight-Batten Awards and New Voices). Questions focused on J-Lab’s positioning in the journalism field, the organization’s strengths, and potential areas for improvement (see Appendix A for the list of insider informants).
- **Grantee document review and interviews:** Desk research (the gathering and analyzing of information already available in print or on the Internet) was conducted on J-Lab documentation regarding New Voices and Net-J grantees, including reports submitted to J-Lab, grantee survey results from 2010, and findings from a Spring 2010 omnibus meeting of grantees. Evaluators also examined each grantee website and documented data on each grantee. Finally, interviews were conducted with a randomly selected group of 10 previous New Voices grantees and all five Net-J project leaders. Interviews focused on what participants gained from their experiences, what was accomplished with the funding, and whether and how these programs are helping J-Lab to promote innovation in journalism (see Appendix A for the list of individuals interviewed).
- **Audience survey:** J-Lab has a diverse audience across its projects that include journalists (professional, community), educators, students, and funders. An online survey (see Appendix B) to subsets of J-Lab contacts (those working in legacy journalism, interactive journalism, and in journalism schools) was used to capture audience feedback on J-Lab’s work and performance. Three hundred forty-five individuals completed the survey.² The graph at right shows the distribution of respondents.³



² The survey reached about 3,500 individuals. This response rate was lower than desired because evaluators could not conduct follow-up to survey recipients due to the high number of bounce backs that resulted from the J-Lab lists (follow-up would have resulted in future survey privileges being revoked due to anti-spam laws.) J-Lab’s list still included old email addresses of many journalists who have left their newsrooms in recent years.

³ “Other” included: Web designer/developer/manager, nonprofit sector, publisher, retired, public relations/affairs, consultant, development/fundraising, media analyst/developer, technology professional, entrepreneur, freelance writer, blogger.

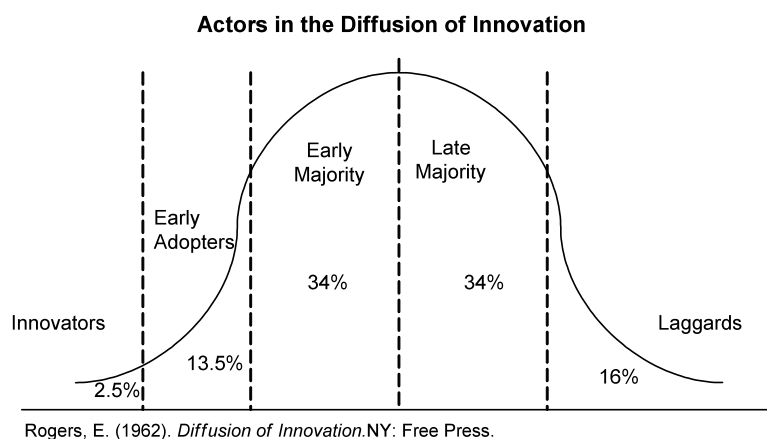
- **Digital media strategy and performance review:** J-Lab maintains four Knight Foundation-funded websites (J-Lab.org, J-NewVoices.org, KCNN.org, J-Learning.org) and has a social media presence. This method reviewed J-Lab’s overall digital media strategy and its website analytics.⁴

THEORY OF CHANGE

Theories of change illustrate graphically how organizations expect change to occur and the roles that they will play in producing that change. Because they provide conceptual frameworks that can guide data collection and reporting, a J-Lab theory of change was developed for this evaluation.

As stated above, J-Lab promotes innovation—its mission is transforming journalism today and reinventing it for tomorrow. Its theory of change, therefore, can be described with the help of a seminal social science theory developed by Everett Rogers on the *diffusion of innovation*.

According to Rogers, five categories of individuals are involved in spreading innovations. Ideas begin with *innovators* and then spread to *early adopters*. Innovators are venturesome, take risks, and try new things. Early adopters are opinion leaders who watch what the innovators do and are the



first to follow suit. After innovators and early adopters, ideas are picked up by the *early majority* and then the *late majority*, which together comprise about two-thirds of a given population or field. The early and late majorities are more deliberate and risk averse. They try new ideas once they are proven effective. Finally, ideas spread to the *laggards*, the last group to adopt the innovation. Laggards are the most traditional and skeptical. They feel little urge to change and by the time they adopt an idea, it is no longer considered new.

⁴ Until a few months ago, J-Lab was using the data provided by its Web host to track website activity. J-Lab just recently started using Google Analytics instead. However, several critical components need to be added to obtain the full benefits of that tool. This analysis, therefore, relied on Web host reports (AWStats), which has significant limitations. AWStats uses raw server log data for reporting (versus the use of cookies by Google Analytics and other enterprise-grade analytic tools). This overestimates most metrics. With time, the switch to Google Analytics will provide J-Lab with higher-quality website tracking data.

J-Lab’s theory of change involves catalyzing, supporting, and spreading innovation.

The innovations to be diffused for J-Lab are, generally speaking, new ideas in interactive and community journalism. J-Lab aims to increase (1) the number of people who know about innovations in these areas and how to do them, and (2) the number of people actually using the innovations in their journalism practice or training. The theory of change figure on the next page illustrates how J-Lab promotes the diffusion of these innovations among its audiences.

J-Lab places a heavy emphasis on diffusing innovation in journalism among the three categories of individuals on the left side of the diffusion curve—innovators, early adopters, and the early majority. The idea implicit in this approach is that changing these three audiences achieves a “tipping point” for innovations to become standard practice in the field.

Turning to the bottom half of the figure, J-Lab uses a series of activities to promote innovation. First, J-Lab identifies field needs and trends. The journalism field is constantly evolving, and J-Lab must keep its finger on the pulse of what is new. Understanding and predicting the field’s needs and how they are changing is an ongoing J-Lab activity.

The figure then illustrates how J-Lab *catalyzes* innovation, particularly among innovators and early adopters. Small grants to startups through the New Voices and Net-J projects seed innovations in communities across the country. J-Lab also conducts or commissions research and writing on new and emerging topics.

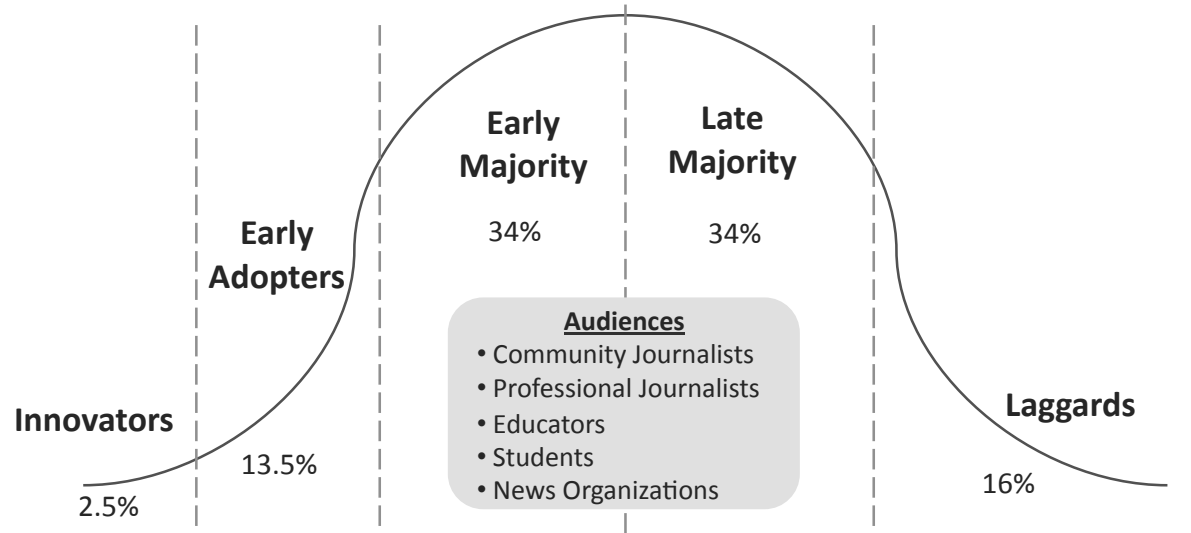
J-Lab *supports* innovation through training offered through J-Learning.org, KCNN.org, and through various in-person workshops and presentations. In addition, the Knight-Batten Awards support innovation in the field by recognizing and financially rewarding it. These activities target the early adopters in the field—individuals who track current trends and are motivated to get the training or tools they need to follow closely behind the field’s out-front experimenters and leaders.

Finally, J-Lab works on spreading innovation to a much broader audience—the early majority. J-Lab’s websites are the primary mechanism for reaching this broader audience. Also included in this category are social media tools, a blog, an e-newsletter, and numerous publications and reports.

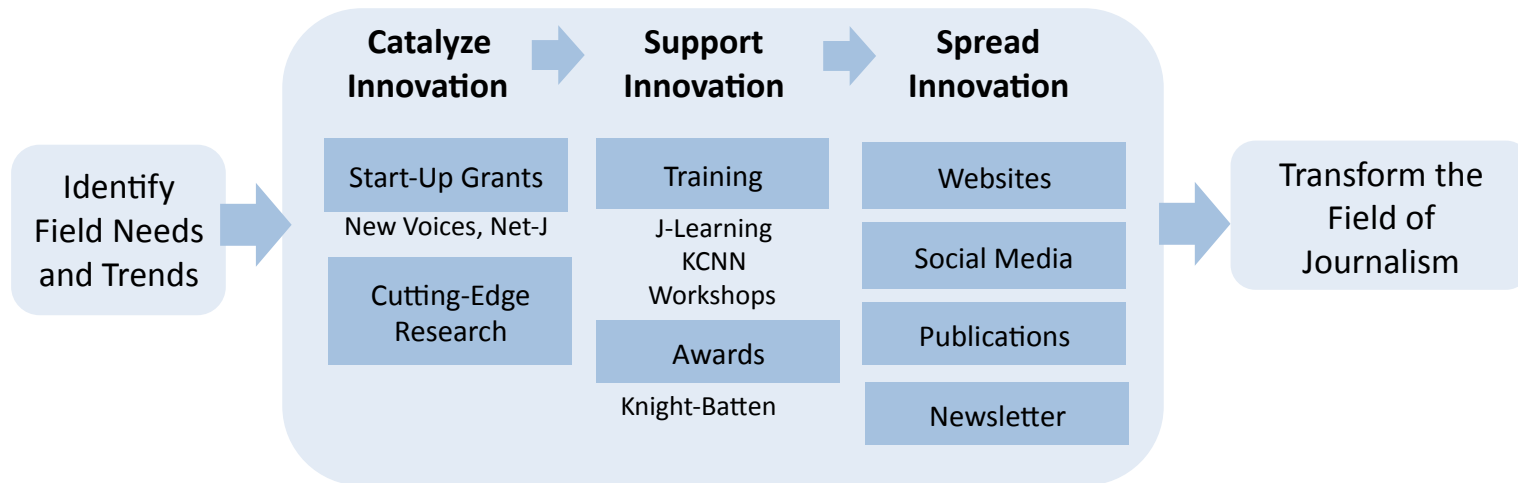
All of these activities are expected to result in field-level changes in community and interactive journalism. At a broad level, this means that these areas of the journalism field continue to grow and thrive. More specifically, it means that the ideas and lessons that J-Lab and its grantees fund, document, and disseminate are picked up and applied by practitioners throughout the field.

J-Lab Theory of Change

Transforming Journalism by Diffusing Innovation



Rogers, E. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovation*. NY: Free Press.



FINDINGS

This section presents the main evaluation findings that emerged from the J-Lab evaluation. Findings are organized by questions that connect to the theory of change. For each question, findings cover points of progress and potential areas for improvement.

❶ Is J-Lab a known, respected, and strong organization?

Knight Foundation Areas of Investment <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Significant and multi-year organizational and project-level support for J-Lab since it was founded.	
Points of Progress <ul style="list-style-type: none">- J-Lab is known for promoting Innovation in journalism.- Audience ratings of J-Lab’s mission and performance are favorable.- J-Lab’s research and reports are in demand (the issue is meeting it).	Areas for Improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none">- J-Lab should be clear about its niche.- J-Lab’s emphasis on individual projects confuses perceptions about what the organization does and how it does it.- 79% of J-Lab’s annual budget comes from the Knight Foundation. Thinking long-term, the Knight Foundation and J-Lab should discuss questions about sustainability.- J-Lab should also address succession.

Points of Progress

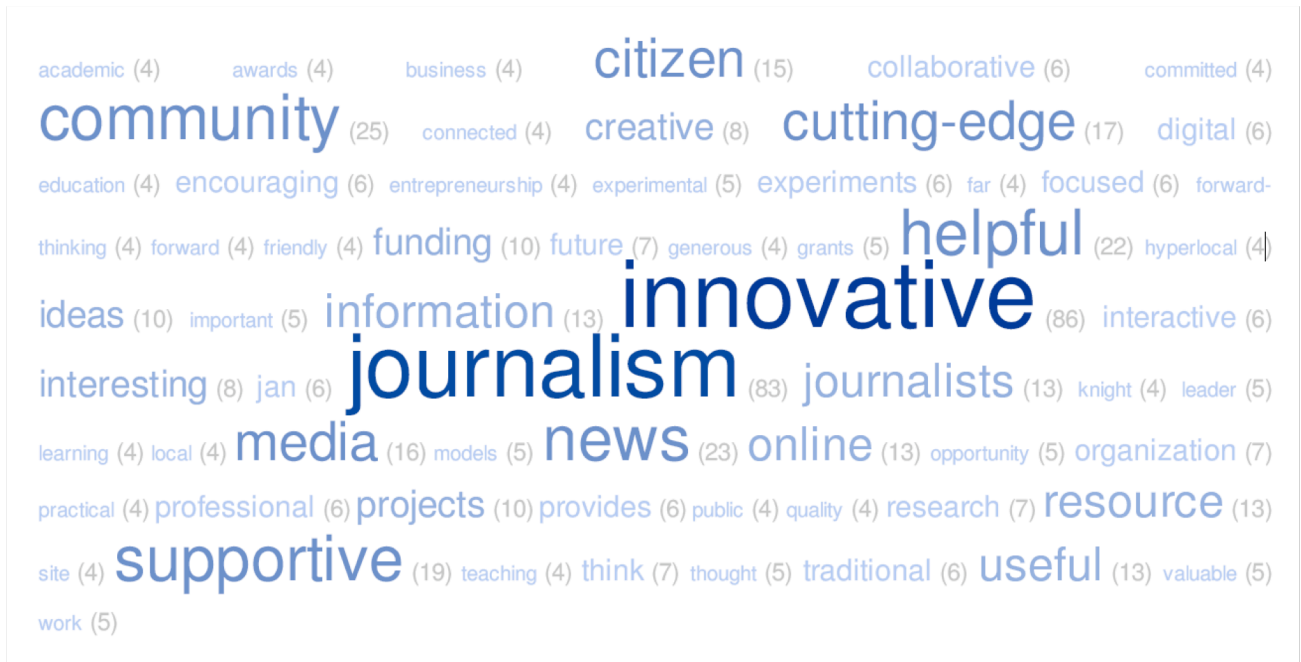
J-Lab is known for promoting innovation in journalism.

Organizations—for-profit and nonprofit alike—strive for brand awareness among their audiences. Brand awareness refers to the likelihood that an organization will come to mind or be recognized in a favorable way when audiences think of the field in which the organization operates. For J-Lab, this means ensuring that its multiple audiences (including journalists, journalism schools and students, researchers, funders, and J-Lab grantees) recognize it as an organization that promotes innovation in journalism, particularly in community journalism.

To assess brand awareness among J-Lab audiences, the audience survey asked respondents to volunteer words and phrases that described J-Lab. Results are represented in the “tag cloud” on the next page, a graphical representation of the words nominated, with larger words indicating a higher frequency of respondents who used those terms. Only words mentioned at least four times are included, and similar words are grouped together (e.g., *innovation* and *innovative*).

As the tag cloud illustrates, respondents on this question (n=267) most often associated J-Lab with being *innovative* in the field of *journalism*, words that are very consistent with its mission. Other common words were *community*, *cutting-edge*, *helpful*, and *supportive*, also words that link directly to J-Lab’s role and mission.

Tag Cloud of Words Used to Describe J-Lab



Interviews with other industry “insiders” and J-Lab grantees supported the finding that J-Lab has a strong and respected reputation. As one key informant said, “When I see smoke and feel heat, I look in J-Lab’s direction.” Comments on the professionalism, expertise, and helpfulness of the J-Lab staff surfaced during all of the interviews. Every key informant singled out Jan Schaffer as a thought leader and visionary, but as someone who is still grounded. “Jan is a hero and a leader in the industry.” “Jan is like a flashlight into the future.” “She has a great way of being in touch with people doing real work on the ground.”

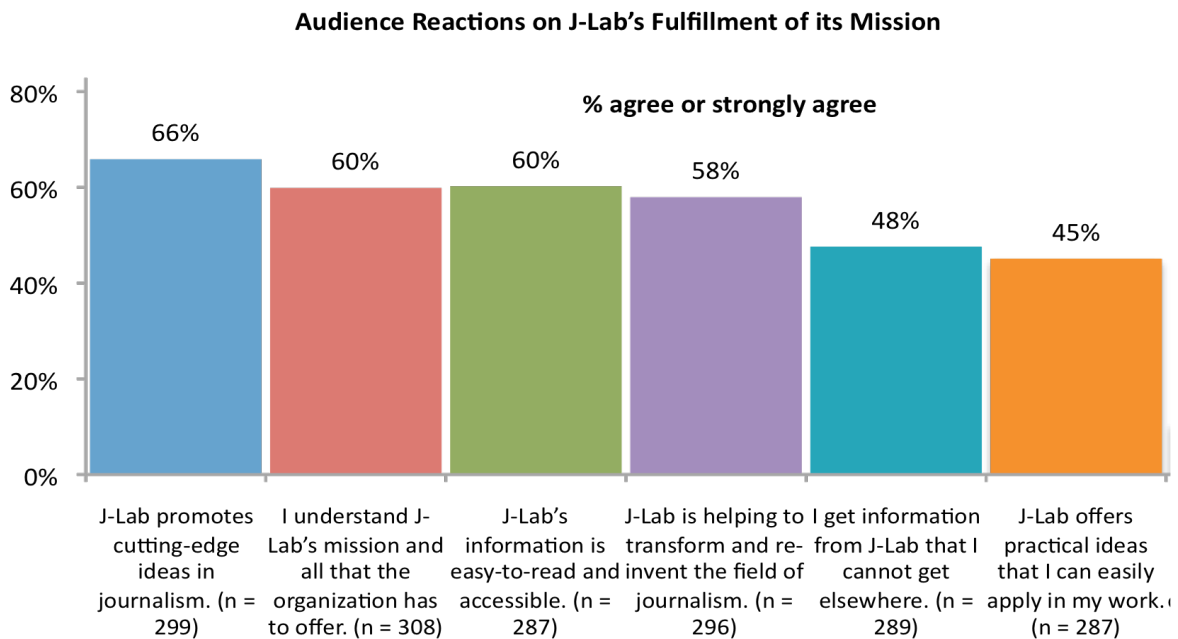
Audience ratings of J-Lab’s mission and performance are favorable.

Periodically, organizations should pause and collect audience feedback on their performance and the extent to which their external audiences think that they are fulfilling their mission. These data can help to signal gaps in what audiences know or identify areas in which to improve.

To this end, the audience survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with several declarative statements about J-Lab. Statements captured reactions on

whether audiences understand J-Lab’s overall mission and think it is fulfilling its mission (promoting cutting-edge ideas in journalism; helping to transform and re-invent the field of journalism), as well as the distinctiveness, accessibility, and applicability of the content J-Lab disseminates.

As the figure below illustrates, two-thirds of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that J-Lab promotes cutting-edge journalism. Slightly smaller majorities also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they understood J-Lab’s mission and all it has to offer (60%); that J-Lab’s information is easy-to-read and accessible; and that J-Lab is helping to transform and reinvent the field of journalism (58%). Less than half (48%) felt they get information from J-Lab that they cannot get other places.



These findings are favorable overall, but they also indicate areas in which J-Lab can improve. Examining the percentage of respondents who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* to each statement reveals that J-Lab may want to focus in particular on increasing audience understanding of what it offers (19% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they understand J-Lab’s mission and all it has to offer).

J-Lab’s research and reports are in demand (the issue is sufficiently meeting it).

In 2005, J-Lab released *Citizen Media: Fad or the Future of News?* (funded by the Ford Foundation), the first report of its kind to explain and chart the emerging wave of community news sites. Since then, J-Lab has earned a reputation for commissioning and producing cutting-edge research and reports. For example:

- *Journalism 2.0: How to Survive and Thrive* (2007) by Mark Briggs about digital literacy was, according to one journalism insider, a “prescient” J-Lab move. The guide came just at the right time to meet an emerging need and became a best “seller” (downloaded over 200,000 times).
- *New Media Makers: A Toolkit for Innovators in Community Media and Grant Making* (2009) by Jan Schaffer contained the first-ever database of grant-funded news projects and is still ordered by foundations around the country.
- The just-released *New Voices: What Works* (2010) report by Jan Schaffer began generating conversation in the blogosphere right after its online release and is expected to fuel training requests.
- J-Lab recently outlined and commissioned a new learning module by Scott Rosenberg on ethics in the community news space that may become a book. This research is also looking into timely topics like the disclosure of police blotter misdemeanor information, privacy, transparency, and the use of Facebook information and images.

J-Lab has a talent for identifying trends in the field and explaining how to take advantage of them in practical ways. While the quality and timeliness of J-Lab’s research and reports are apparent, the bigger issue is the extent to which J-Lab is marketing and promoting them effectively so that the field is aware they exist and can put the content to use (discussed more later).

Areas for Improvement

J-Lab should be clear about its niche.

Stakeholders and audience members raised questions about whether J-Lab’s primary focus is on citizen journalism, community journalism, interactive journalism, or innovation in journalism generally. This confusion gets compounded when J-Lab adds new projects, which happens fairly regularly.

Other questions surfaced about how J-Lab differs from the many other organizations and projects that are promoting innovation in journalism. For example, the Knight Digital Media Center (University of Southern California UC-Berkeley), Nieman Journalism Lab (Harvard University), and Renaissance Journalism Center (San Francisco State University) are also small university-based efforts dedicated to helping journalism succeed in the 21st century. In addition, the Knight News Challenge awards large grants for innovative ideas that inform and transform community news (sharing some similarities with the Knight-Batten Awards, except Challenge grants are much larger).

While J-Lab asserts that no other organization does exactly what it does, J-Lab also acknowledges that audiences sometimes get confused about how it differs from others. This is especially true with other journalism projects that are Knight Foundation-funded or Knight Foundation branded. For example, some survey respondents confused New Voices with the Knight News Challenge. This confusion signals a need for J-Lab to be clearer about its niche.

J-Lab plans to frame its future work as supporting community journalism. While previously J-Lab's work was branded under the *Knight Citizen News Network*, J-Lab now sees citizen journalism as just *one form* of community journalism and too narrow for all that J-Lab does. In addition, J-Lab reports that the term "citizen journalism" is dated, as citizen journalists do not want to be called "journalists," and professional journalists reporting at the community level do not want to be called "citizen" journalists. Consequently, J-Lab feels that billing the organization as focused on citizen journalism hurts rather than helps them, and limits their audience (this is the reason that J-Lab has expressed the desire to change the Knight Citizen News Network to the Knight *Community* News Network). J-Lab plans to continue to support amateur journalists, particularly in their attempts to do interactive journalism, but will do so within the broader community frame.

Also within that broader frame, J-Lab plans to focus more on:

- *Awards for innovation in journalism*, with a focus on both journalism outcomes *and processes*
- *Networked/Collaborative journalism*—building on Net-J and J-Lab's leadership in this area
- *Sustainability*—focusing specifically on sustainability for community news (J-Lab previously emphasized the start up process more than sustainability)
- *Rethinking journalism*—especially through the eyes of young journalists.

As J-Lab moves forward with its plans, it may be useful to do a current and comprehensive mapping of the other organizations and funders that are working near or around it, as multiple organizations focus on community journalism, and multiple organizations focus on interactive technologies and new media. This up-to-date mapping will help J-Lab to renew its understanding about how it adds unique value to the field, and will help to identify potential partners for collaboration (discussed more later). J-Lab should organize this mapping around the five main functions it uses to promote innovation: (1) information development and dissemination; (2) education and training; (3) grant making; (4) community outreach and engagement; and (5) showcasing best practices (including through awards). The mapping can be simple matrix that assesses other organizations against these five areas.

Example Field Mapping

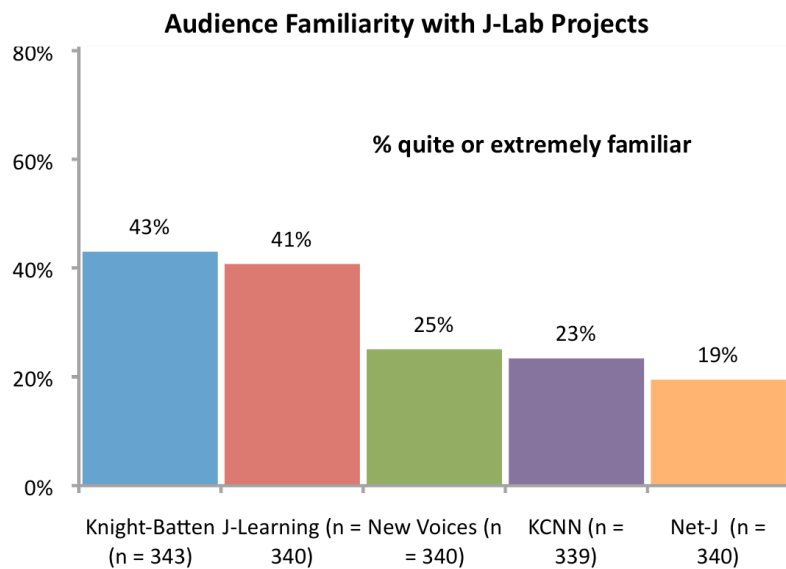
	Primary Areas of Emphasis					
	FOCUS	Info Devt. and Dissemination	Education and Training	Grantmaking	Outreach and Engagement	Showcasing
Knight Digital Media Center	New/Digital media	✓	✓		✓	✓
Nieman Journalism Lab	New/Digital media				✓	✓
Renaissance Journalism Center	Community journalism		✓	✓		
Knight News Challenge	Community journalism			✓		✓
Knight Commission on the Info Needs of Communities	Community journalism	✓			✓	✓
Knight Community Info Challenge	Community journalism			✓	✓	✓
Poyntner Institute	Journalism	✓	✓			
<i>Other Organizations and Efforts</i>						

Both because J-Lab is shifting its focus slightly, and because the evaluation revealed some confusion among audiences about the differences between J-Lab and other Knight Foundation-funded projects, J-Lab and the Knight Foundation should have a conversation about this clarification of focus and broader mapping of the field (a practice that the Knight Foundation likely has done as well for its own grantmaking). The conversation should include how future communications and positioning (from both J-Lab and the Knight Foundation) can help to eliminate further misunderstandings.

J-Lab’s emphasis on individual projects confuses perceptions about what the organization does and how it does it.

In addition to general brand awareness, organizations want their audiences to have a more specific understanding of what they do and how they do it. Familiarity ensures that when audiences have relevant information, training, or other needs, they will know where to go to meet them.

The audience survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they were familiar with J-Lab’s main projects. Less than half of the respondents reported that they were either *quite* or *extremely* familiar with the Knight-Batten Awards (43%) or J-Learning (41%), and a quarter or less reported the same for New Voices (25%), KCNN (23%), and Net-J (19%). These trends were expected, as the



Knight-Batten Awards are highly publicized and J-Learning appeals to a broad swath of J-Lab audiences, while the other three projects have narrower targets.⁵

One conclusion from these findings might be that J-Lab should raise awareness about its individual projects. Further examination reveals, however, that it is more important for J-Lab to be clearer about its overall organizational mission than its discrete projects. Open-ended survey responses to the question about what J-Lab can do better in the future support this point. Some of the strongest themes that emerged were about J-Lab communicating the full scope of its work and communicating it with more clarity. For example, one respondent said, “They need more marketing about all they do.” Another said, “I thought I knew about J-lab and just doing this survey I learned about several aspects of J-Lab I knew nothing about...” Still another said, “Perhaps it needs to market itself differently. I have been aware of it since the beginning, but haven't really taken a close look at it.”

⁵ In addition, the survey was administered when the Knight-Batten Awards were being promoted heavily (for a September 14, 2010 symposium at the Newseum). Finally, these results came from a survey of individuals who J-Lab had some contact with at some point in its history; not necessarily individuals with whom J-Lab has engaged.

J-Lab points out that each of its projects targets different audiences (e.g., J-Learning targets students and educators, while New Voices targets community journalists), and therefore its audiences do not always want to know everything that the organization does. J-Lab's website structure underscores this point (more on this later). The challenge with this way of thinking is that J-Lab's audiences do not fit neatly into mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they cross multiple categories or move between them. Marketing J-Lab's projects as grant deliverables rather than what the organization offers as a whole creates confusion and thwarts opportunities for audiences to learn about and benefit from all that the organization has to offer. J-Lab is aware that the old emphasis on websites and outreach focused on grant deliverables rather than broad themes or functions is not in sync with its audiences' needs and is looking to address this issue in the future.

The overall point is that J-Lab should communicate clearly about the field it aims to advance (community journalism). Re-branding KCNN should help to move J-Lab in this direction. In addition, J-Lab should be clear about *how* it is advancing it. J-Lab should promote the five functions it performs and how they work together to advance J-Lab's mission, rather than market individual projects.

Seventy-nine percent of J-Lab's annual budget comes from the Knight Foundation. Thinking long-term, the Knight Foundation and J-Lab should discuss questions about sustainability.

J-Lab's key stakeholders want to make sure that J-Lab is thinking long-term about its financial sustainability. For the last two years, J-Lab has had an annual budget of just over \$1.5 million. Of that, 79 percent comes from the Knight Foundation. Three other foundations and American University contribute the remaining 21 percent.⁶

J-Lab is exploring opportunities to increase the portion of its budget that is not Knight-funded. This includes developing revenue streams that build on certain aspects of its reputation (e.g., in-person fee-for-service training, charging for publications).

Foundation funding will, however, likely continue to make up the greatest portion of J-Lab's budget. Acknowledging this, stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation encouraged J-Lab to consider more diversification in terms of foundation supporters.

⁶ This includes \$200,000 from The McCormick Foundation for New Media Women Entrepreneurs; \$225,500 from the William Penn Foundation for Philadelphia media projects; and \$97,000 from the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation for interactive training and summits at journalism gatherings and to produce learning modules for KCNN.org and J-Learning.org. About \$15,000 has come in from Journalism 2.0 book orders, conference registrations and fees. Finally, American University's School of Communication supplies J-Lab with two graduate assistants and two work study students per academic year.

Because the Knight Foundation grant covers such a large scope of work, J-Lab currently seeks grants that build on Knight-supported work or that help to share the knowledge accumulated from it. According to J-Lab, seeking grants for entirely new or unrelated work (not funded by the Knight Foundation) would require them to expand their staff or hire more consultants.

J-Lab also reports that out of loyalty and appreciation for the Knight Foundation's support, it has given the Foundation "first dibs" on grant ideas and expects to continue to do that. If and when the Knight Foundation is not interested in those ideas, J-Lab plans to discuss them with other funders, and has been working with the Dean of American University's School of Communication to identify a promising list.

This discussion makes clear the importance of the Knight Foundation and J-Lab having a candid conversation about the future and both parties' expectations and questions about sustainability. For example, should J-Lab continue to give the Knight Foundation first dibs on project ideas? Also, what are the implications of bringing in other funders for J-Lab projects that until now it have been exclusively supported by the Knight Foundation, including those that bear its name (e.g., KCNN, the Knight-Batten Awards)? Addressing these questions directly will help J-Lab understand how it can best leverage any future Knight Foundation funding.

J-Lab also should also address succession.

Stakeholders also wanted to make sure that J-Lab was thinking about the future in terms of eventual leadership succession. Until now, J-Lab's reputation in the broader field has been connected directly to the individual reputation and capacity of executive director Jan Schaffer. Interviewees said they see this now expanding some, particularly with the recent hire of Editorial Director and veteran journalist Andrew Pergam. But stakeholders want J-Lab to remain a viable and sustainable entity in the field with a strong *organizational* reputation rather than a reputation based mainly on the organization's founder and executive. For sure, J-Lab is thinking about this issue, but stakeholders want to make sure a focus on this issue is explicit as J-Lab moves forward.

② Is J-Lab catalyzing and supporting innovation in journalism?

Knight Foundation Areas of Investment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Knight-Batten Awards</i> for Innovations in Journalism - <i>New Voices</i> grants for startup ventures - <i>Net-J</i> grants to mainstream news outlets to collaborate with community news sites - Conferences, workshops, seminars 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Knight Citizen News Network</i> (KCNN.org) and the development of learning modules - J-Learning.org and learning modules - Toolkits and other resources - Analysis, research partnerships, mini-documentaries 	
Points of Progress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New Voices has a strong record on successful innovation: 46 grantees have launched 48 projects. Of these, 88% are still online. - Networked Journalism is off to a strong start. 25 partners were expected across the 5 grantees; they had far exceeded expectations by the grants' midpoint (61 partners). 		Areas for Improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New Voices should evolve to reflect the changing community journalism landscape. - J-Lab startups (both New Voices and Net-J) need direct support on sustainability. - Additional collaboration can strengthen J-Lab and help it leverage its impact. 	

Points of Progress

New Voices has a strong record on successful startups: 46 grantees have launched 48 projects. Of these, 88 percent are still online.

J-Lab has two projects designed to catalyze innovation through small grants to organizations and individuals in the journalism field—New Voices and Networked Journalism. New Voices is “an incubator for pioneering community news ventures in the United

States.” Each year, New Voices funds the start of innovative micro-local news projects (\$17,000 grants with the opportunity for \$8,000 in follow-up funding), and then provides grantees with technical support and online training in creating and sustaining websites. J-Lab began giving New Voices grants in 2005, and has offered about 8-10 grants per year since. New Voices is recognized and respected in the field, evidenced by the 1,433 applications that came in between 2005 and 2009.

New Voices data and documentation are clear that civic-minded people saw that a lack of information was constraining civic engagement and community capacity and used New Voices seed grants to do something about it in their hometowns. For example, New Castle Now

New Voices Summary Stats

- 46 grantees in 6 years
- 48 projects launched
- 88% of all projects are still online (6 are not)
- 10 grantees had topical sites; 36 had geographic sites
- \$833,000 in J-Lab grants have leveraged \$1.44m in additional funds

(NewCastleNOW.org) started as a way to shed light and provoke debate about actions of the local school board that did not seem to be in the community's best interests. Appalachia Independent (appindie.org) sought alternative voices in a community dominated by a conservative newspaper. Green Jobs Philly (greenjobsphilly.org) created an action-oriented site aimed at helping people connect with resources and opportunities in a green environment. Greater Fulton News (greaterfultonnews.org) sought to plant the seeds of community journalism in a cluster of neighborhoods.

New Voices grantees are proud of what they have accomplished. All but 6 grantees created operational websites, fulfilling New Voices' "startup" emphasis. In addition, the 46 projects were able to turn \$833,000 in J-Lab grants into \$1.44 million in other grants, donations, and advertising revenue (although \$760,000 came from one project, Twin Cities Daily Planet (tcdailyplanet.net)).⁷

While New Voices has generated a great deal of success, because it is about experimentation, not everything has been successful and a great deal has been learned. For example, in their new report *New Voices: What Works*, J-Lab identified the ten key lessons that have emerged over the last six years (based on a March 2010 grantee survey, interviews, and direct experience):

1. Engagement is key. Good content without robust engagement isn't enough.
2. Citizen journalism is a high-touch, high-churn enterprise—training did not have a high return
3. Sweat equity counts for a lot – the level of founder effort is a strong indicator of sustainability
4. It's not a business yet—building sustainable demand does not lead to financial sustainability
5. Social media is game changing
6. Technology can be a blessing and a curse —custom websites can be a quagmire
7. Legacy news outlets are not yet in the game—partnerships do not occur until sites launch
8. The academic calendar is not good enough—college sites lose momentum unless year round
9. The community news sphere is for grown ups—middle, high school and college students should not be the primary content generators.
10. Community radio needs help—it needs more support and stable leadership.

J-Lab already has applied a number of these lessons. Universities are now required to commit to year-round projects (lesson 8). Youth media training is now strongly discouraged (lesson 9). Project leaders must assure they will be around for two years of the grant (lesson 2). J-Lab probes on whether projects have the technology skills they need (lesson 6). The Networked Journalism project, which seeds partnerships between legacy and new media, targets lesson 7. The most recent batch of grantees did not include community radio (lesson 10). Looking ahead, Lessons 4 and 7 on building sustainable

⁷ Schaffer, J. (2010). *New Voices: What works*. Washington, DC: J-Lab. www.kcnn.org/nv_whatworks/pdf

demand and successful partnerships appear to be the biggest challenges for J-Lab moving forward. Both are discussed in the findings below.

Networked Journalism is off to a strong start. Twenty-five partners were expected across the 5 grantees; they had far exceeded expectations by the grants’ midpoint (61 partners).

The Networked Journalism (Net-J) project funds news organizations around the country to collaborate with hyper-local news sites or bloggers in their communities. These partnerships create content networks that bring local users richer and more relevant information. The project started in 2009 with one-year funding to five news organizations (*The Miami Herald, Tucson Citizen, The Seattle Times, Charlotte Observer, and Asheville Citizen-Times*). Funds support a liaison at the newspaper and small stipends to local partners (at least five were required per news organization).

The table below summarizes where grantees were at the midpoint in their first-year grant.

Net-J Grantees 2010

Grantee	Partners	Key Successes	Key Challenges
1. Charlotte Observer	5	- Content sharing—print <i>Observer</i> carried 150 partner stories in 6 months	- Training partners to meet standards - Consistent partner delivery (3 of 5 partnerships worked) - Monetization and advertising
2. The Miami Herald	12	- Partner site traffic grew from 83,824 page views to 182,130 in four months	- Training partners to meet standards
3. The Seattle Times	28	- Number of partners far exceeded expectations - Multiple collaborative stories produced between <i>Seattle Times</i> and bloggers	- Monetization and advertising - Managing the partners
4. Tucson Citizen Sports Network	9	- Number of partners far exceeded expectations - 21% of TC.com traffic comes from the Sports Network	- Monetization and advertising
5. Asheville Citizen-Times	7	- Content diversity among partners - Almost daily content sharing	- Training partners to meet standards - Monetization and advertising

Network managers in the five traditional newsrooms revealed that *content partnerships* are taking shape as intended. All grantees are meeting expectations in this area. Only one grantee has not gone above the five partnerships required. Seattle, for example, has a lively and growing neighborhood blogging community, and *The Seattle Times* is going beyond linking to sites to direct collaboration in news gathering. *The Seattle Times* also has taken on 28 partners, well above the five required by the Net-J grant. Taking this even further, at the end of October 2010, *The Seattle Times* with KING-TV

announced an ad-sharing initiative among its partners and other news outlets in its region. *The Tucson Citizen* has taken a different tact and is recruiting bloggers within the narrower niche of sports. In July 2010, they had 9 active partners.

Perhaps the most significant impact so far, in the view of managers, is that Net-J has pushed cultural change in traditional newsrooms by demonstrating that community news startups are worthy content partners. This is a significant shift from an era in which traditional newsroom journalists typically bought into a disdainful stereotype of bloggers as caring little about accuracy or fairness. The project changed the newspaper more than the community, one editor said. It “essentially opened up the eyes of the newspaper that there might be other ways to skin the cat.” It also changed what the readers are getting, “exposed to content they realistically didn’t know existed a year ago.” Meanwhile, the blogging community is starting to see the newspaper as a friendly thing, at least to some extent.

Challenges for Net-J fall into two general categories—monetization/advertising (similar to New Voices), and training partners. This latter point refers to the fact that mainstream news grantees said some local partners sought instruction and training in many areas, including using social media, selling ads, and learning standards about news reporting (e.g., what counts as news and what does not). In fact, both sides needed to negotiate these rules. In particular, in defining what is news, the local partners are experimenting with somewhat different definitions of news and objectivity, seeing themselves more as participant observers in their community and the news being generated than as reporters who stand off to the side. They are looking to use their roles and their sites to actively contribute to their communities rather than passively cover it. Just as adjusting to mainstream standards can be a challenge for local partners, this way of thinking about the role of local partners can be an adjustment for mainstream news grantees.

Overall, however, the “theory” that J-Lab could spark successful partnerships and broader innovation on partnerships appears to be playing out as intended. Mainstream news organizations are responding to the “try it, you’ll like it” approach and are now increasing their partnerships on their own. Also, word about Net-J is spreading and other non-grantee news organizations are eager to participate. For example, just last month J-Lab issued invitations to four news organizations (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Portland Oregonian*, and KQED public radio in San Francisco) to participate in the new grant cycle (the cycle is by invitation only). All four editors immediately said “yes” and started lining up partners and coordinators that week. While much remains to be learned from this initial experiment, the development of these kinds of partnerships and collaborations is a space in which J-Lab could make a significant contribution, with relatively modest grants.

Areas for Improvement

New Voices should evolve to reflect the changing community journalism landscape.

The news landscape in which J-Lab operates has changed dramatically in the years since New Voices started. New Voices was designed to foster experimentation and innovation by highlighting new ideas and funding citizen journalist pioneers heading across an online news frontier. It started at a time when would-be community news publishers knew little about the challenges of effective online engagement and the sand traps of Web development 1.0.

Fast forward to 2010, and the landscape, still highly dynamic, has changed in significant ways. Journalists displaced from legacy news organizations are moving into online community journalism, often as publisher-entrepreneurs or as employees of nonprofit startups. Other new players are getting involved in news and information, including Government 2.0 advocates and tech developers; accountability advocates such as the Sunlight Foundation; community foundations; and other funders. Perhaps most significant is the explosive growth in the number of local and niche sites and blogs in recent years, which are fueled by easy-to-use tools and journalists displaced from legacy media. For example, one in two Americans now lives in a city or town served by a “placeblog,” compared to one in eight in 2006.⁸

Starting a new community site is significantly less fraught with challenges than it was just a few years ago. **However, developing a community of users and figuring out how to parlay their engagement into a sustainable operation are significant problems for publishers.** Engagement, traffic, and revenue are the new frontier for many community sites. A focus on sustainability versus startups is a clear need and growth opportunity for J-Lab.

In response to these changes, J-Lab plans to change New Voices (and possibly rename it). They agree that funding startups is no longer the primary need and that the field has moved on. They want to focus less on first-generation innovators, and focus more on early adopters. As Jan Schaffer put it, “It’s pretty easy now to start a community news site and populate it with content. What’s not easy is when you’re two years into the project and realize what you really need to do next and don’t have the resources to do it.” To do this, they propose developing a competitive “New Ideas Fund” and knowledge-sharing network to move early adopters to the next stage and support their sustainability.

Looking ahead, J-Lab might think about changing the New Voices project by, for example:

⁸ Source: Lisa Williams, CEO of Placeblogger.com.

- Modifying the application criteria to serve a different kind of grantee at a different stage of development (i.e., the community site already has been built but is looking for ways to increase its reach and impact). J-Lab is already making plans in this direction. Also, J-Lab should continue to think about *who* the new voices are in the community journalism field. For example, J-Lab's desire (in its next proposal to the Knight Foundation) to experiment with New Voices funding to professional journalists making the transition from a traditional newsroom to a newly independent status could add much value in terms of determining how to support this growing segment of the field.
- Staying with grantees for longer periods of time to help them work through sustainability issues (which would also help to ease the grantee selection and administrative workload)
- Leveraging the experiences of previous grantees (particularly those that have been successful with financial sustainability) to support new grantees.

These ideas would evolve and refresh the New Voices project, but would also build on what already exists, rather than create something new that may require a whole new infrastructure and system of administration.

J-Lab startups (both New Voices and Net-J) need direct support on sustainability.

One of the biggest lessons from New Voices and Net-J so far has been that grantees have developed working sites only to be confronted with the question of "Now what?" in areas such as marketing, training, retaining contributors, and finding stable funding. A number of New Voices grantees overestimated the degree to which people would engage and invest time in their sites—a classic "If we build it, they will come" conundrum. As one grantee said, "The part that we've not been able to accomplish is generating the citizen journalism from all perspectives." The issue has been the lack of writers. "We truly wanted to create a dialogue. But we've not gotten the writers...The missing link is the marketing and the PR, finding the angles to get people to contribute." "We thought a great idea and writing would catch fire, and that's not the case," said another. "We never had more than 8-10 people at any of our training sessions. We probably should have thought of ways to incentivize. 'We build it and they will come' is not true. We really needed to get out and shake the bushes."

Sustainability in terms of funding is also a major issue. It is clear that a \$25,000 grant over two years will get a site started but is unlikely to foster long-term sustainability for many, as J-Lab noted in

its new report on lessons learned from New Voices.⁹ Although many sites attempted to achieve sustainability through advertising, individual donations, or other foundations, their overall success in doing this was quite modest. Interviews with New Voices grantees suggest that publishers are putting most of their effort into keeping their sites alive day-to-day with little capacity to focus on a sustainable revenue model, which for a small nonprofit might include sponsorships, donations, grants, and offering media training to local businesses. Grantees seem resigned to long hours as volunteer site operators or to chasing serial grants to keep their sites going. “It has been difficult to sell advertising online. I’m not sure why,” said one grantee who does not think he can make the site sustainable and is looking for someone to take it over and turn it into a business. Others feel stuck in the volunteer model. “A lot of us are women who are used to contributing their time, so the business plan just didn’t make the top of the list because the model is volunteerism.” Revenue and sustainability may become increasingly important factors as site founders burn out or turn to other interests. Revenue is the “next big question to ask ourselves. We really need to go out and another grant or get money through patrons,” she said. “We haven’t made it a priority.”

Net-J projects also struggle with sustainability. As mentioned earlier, while content networks have begun, editors said *revenue partnerships* are largely still undeveloped (although these projects have been underway only one year and second year funding focuses more on revenue models). “Content relationship and collaborations are easy and most of that went as expected. What did not work or was more of a challenge is trying to get the business side of our operation to recognize the opportunities we saw in the content side in terms of a business relationship,” one editor said. “They’re too focused on trying to sell a \$100,000 ad contract instead of trying to work out what in the future might turn out to be more valuable than that if we had a local network.” Another said an “expectation that the project could work without an ad model proved wrong. Additionally, the ad revenue generated is unsatisfactory for the partner sites.” “We trained them in advertising sales, and it’s just not working. Overall, the ad model has failed to provide them with the revenue they expected. Now, “it’s a question of reposition expectations” regarding making money.

Without outside expertise, it does not appear that grantees will yield business solutions quickly. J-Lab conversations and documentation make it clear that this lesson is clearly understood and the organization is considering how to address it (e.g., J-Lab may want to consider building a focus on sustainability into its New Voices project, either via direct grants or other supporting resources, such as paying for business consulting). Tackling it successfully could substantially improve the already

⁹ Schaffer, J. (2010). *New Voices: What works*. Washington, DC: J-Lab. www.kcnn.org/nv_whatworks/pdf

impressive results that have emerged to date from these projects. In determining how to do this, J-Lab might consider connecting to the project that the Knight Foundation has commissioned on sustainability on behalf of a group of larger nonprofit Knight Foundation-funded sites including Voice of San Diego (voiceofsandiego.org) and The Texas Tribune (texastribune.org). Also, earlier this year, The Patterson Foundation began development of an online networking platform that can connect online community news publishers with one another and with resources they need.

Additional collaboration can strengthen J-Lab and help it leverage its impact.

Just a few years ago, J-Lab was one of very few early community news pioneers. Now, more organizations are seeking to support this important sector. These newer arrivals offer the potential for J-Lab partnership and collaboration as the field continues to evolve.

Currently, J-Lab collaborates regularly with some organizations and partners with others as opportunities arise. Ongoing partners in recent years include the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (J-Lab hosts annual lunches at the convention) and the Online News Association (with pre-conference workshops).

J-Lab also has partnerships with other Knight Foundation grantees and partners. For example, J-Lab hired Brant Houston, Knight Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting, to author a training module on “How to Create a Nonprofit News Site” and partnered with Knight News Challenge winner Scott Rosenberg to author J-Lab’s ethics module. J-Lab does presentations and trainings for the Knight Digital Media Center, and has brought in Knight Chairs, Knight-funded projects, News Challenge winners, the News21 Director, and others to serve on its advisory boards.

The point here is to support such collaboration as a continued direction for J-Lab, and to encourage outreach to new and different players in the field, particularly because J-Lab is a small organization with limited capacity. Collaboration offers J-Lab the opportunity to leverage its impact.

In thinking about future partners, J-Lab should consider how other organizations or individuals can enhance its five functions. The field mapping discussed earlier can inform this consideration.

- **Information Dissemination:** J-Lab produces an enormous amount of online and written content. One of the findings discussed later in this report focuses on making sure J-Lab is communicating that content strategically so it reaches as many audience members as possible. Two-way dissemination partnerships with more organizations that have existing and wide-reaching communications mechanisms (websites, newsletters, social media, etc.) and that reach large numbers of J-Lab’s

audiences, is an efficient way of substantially increasing J-Lab's visibility and reach.

- **Education and Training:** J-Lab already partners with many prominent individuals on the development of training content. Looking ahead, J-Lab might seek more partnerships on the *delivery* of its content. For example, J-Lab might embed certain training modules or content in the trainings that other organizations are offering (particularly when those trainings are in-person, as there is a great deal of demand for such training but J-Lab does not have the staff to meet it). The Poynter Institute is just one possibility to consider. Traditionally focused on the craft of journalism, it is starting to experiment with training news entrepreneurs.
- **Grantmaking:** Regardless of what J-Lab does with its New Voices projects, there may be opportunities to partner with other organizations that are giving grants for news startups or community news efforts. For example, the Harnish Foundation funds news startups and support resources. As well, universities are playing an increasing role in starting and fueling news sites with student reporters (a fact which J-Lab recognizes given its grants to many universities through New Voices). In addition to sharing learning about the process of grantmaking in the journalism field and avoiding duplication wherever possible, partnerships might be formed to share resources or costs for supporting grantees on common technical assistance challenges or training needs.
- **Community Engagement:** The task of spreading innovation requires that members of J-Lab's audiences interact with and learn from each other. J-Lab should continue to act on their expressed desire to place more emphasis on building the *community* of community news site creators.
- **Showcasing:** Many of the awards and grants that J-Lab funds feature groundbreaking ideas and models. J-Lab's small staff can only do so much to ensure the broader field hears about these good ideas. Looking ahead, J-Lab might rely more on its award winners and grantees to take on some of this showcasing function themselves (for example, J-Lab has raised funds from the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation to send New Voices and Knight-Batten winners to journalism conventions, workshops, summits, and other gatherings to showcase their work). J-Lab might even build this requirement into New Voices or Net-J grant agreements, so grantees have to identify at least one way in which they will communicate what they have learned with the broader field.

③ Is J-Lab spreading innovation?

Knight Foundation Areas of Investment	
- J-Lab Staff: Web & Social Media Editor	- J-Learning.org
- J-Lab.org	- KCNN.org
- J-NewVoices.org	- Social media, blog
Points of Progress	Areas for Improvement
- J-Lab offers a great deal of rich content on its websites, Audiences are coming to the sites and are engaging with the content online.	- J-Lab should examine its communications strategy and the purposes and roles that each of its channels plays.
	- J-Lab should explore strategies for improving website traffic.
	- J-Lab should review user engagement with its content.
	- J-Lab should streamline its websites.


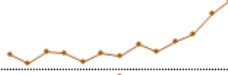


Points of Progress

J-Lab offers a great deal of rich content on its websites. Audiences are coming to the sites and are engaging with the content online.

J-Lab’s online presence represents its primary mechanism for spreading innovation to the broader journalism field. J-Lab maintains multiple websites (J-Lab.org, KCNN.org, J-Learning.org, J-NewVoices.org) and has begun to develop its presence in the social media space (Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo). J-Lab constantly updates its websites with new resources, learning modules, blog posts, and many other types of content.

The chart at right shows website traffic data for J-Lab’s four sites. Unique visitor data is important because it is a proxy for gauging audience reach, or how many people have interacted with J-Lab content. The two training sites (J-Learning.org and KCNN.org) have had the most traffic over the last

Number of Unique Website Visitors

13 Month Trends Aug 2009 - Aug 2010	Avg. Monthly Uniques	YOY	Trend
J-Lab	7,408	19%	
J-Learning	10,428	65%	
J-Newvoices	3,912	-23%	
KCNN	10,611	-9%	

year, with over 10,000 unique visitors each per month. Because it is much more of a niche site, not surprisingly, J-NewVoices.org has generated the least amount of traffic.

J-Learning.org has the most momentum in terms of growth, especially over the last 5 months, growing 57 percent in that period (April–August 2010). The J-Lab.org portal is the only other site to trend up. Other sites trended down in this same period, although the trend for J-NewVoices.org is largely tied to the grants cycle and tends to peak when grants are made.

The chart at right also reveals that sites are performing fairly well in terms of content consumption. Page depths are over four in most cases (the average number of page views visitors consume before ending the session), users visit twice a month on average, and they stay over four minutes during visits. The amount of time they stay is naturally longer on the learning-focused sites (J-Learning.org and KCNN.org). But the amount of time spent on the main J-Lab.org portal, and the average page depth for that site is also fairly impressive.

User Engagement with J-Lab Websites				
13 Month Trend Aug 2009 - Aug 2010	J-Lab	J-Learning	J-Newvoices	KCNN
Avg Page Depth	7.5	5.3	3.6	4.2
Frequency of Visits	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.6
Avg Time on Site (Mins.)	4.8	5.3	2.7	5.9

Areas for Improvement

J-Lab should examine its communications strategy and the purposes and roles that each of its channels plays (i.e., websites, social media).

One theme that surfaced across all of the evaluation methods is a lack of clarity and consistency in what J-Lab is communicating to its audiences and how it is communicated. As stated earlier, while J-Lab’s audiences understand its overall brand, they lack clarity and breadth on the next layer of detail regarding what J-Lab is doing and producing.

This finding suggests that J-Lab take a close look at its overall communications strategy, which includes a review of the audiences it is trying to reach, how it is reaching them, and what is being conveyed to each audience in terms of content and messages. J-Lab churns out a large amount of high-quality content, but the evaluation surfaced questions about whether J-Lab is paying enough attention to making sure its content adequately reaches its audiences.

A major aspect of the communications strategy should be an examination of what J-Lab is trying to achieve online, including the primary purpose of J-Lab’s websites. The websites could be an online repository of J-Lab’s work, providing essential support and information (which is primarily what they are

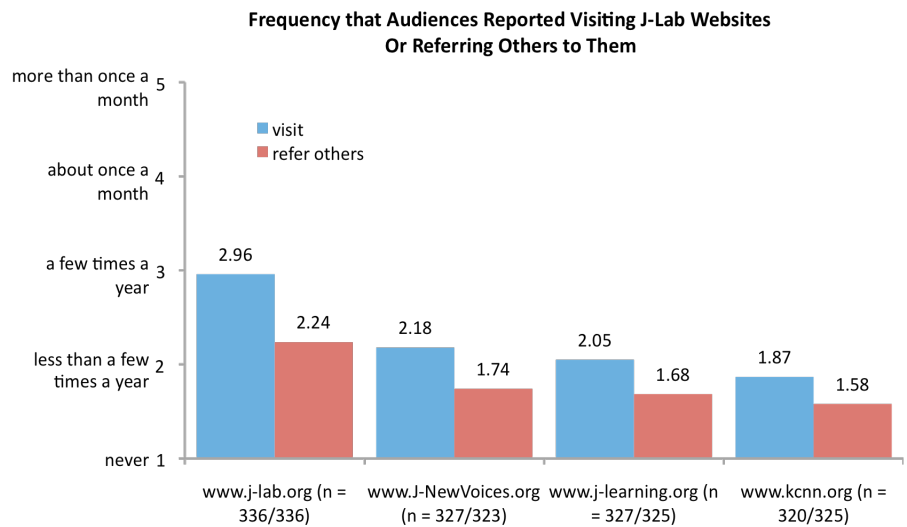
now). Or, they could be a hub for the exchange of ideas and information, as well as a support for J-Lab’s grantmaking. These two propositions are very different. The first involves a less active role in finding and engaging with J-Lab audiences. The second involves an intentional strategy to attract and engage users.

Currently, there is little J-Lab activity around online engagement. For example, the sites’ community features are not readily apparent. In addition, social media is not fully developed as an engagement channel. If the goal of J-Lab’s online presence is to spread innovation through its websites and other online channels, then user engagement should be a more prominent feature and function.

J-Lab should explore strategies for improving website traffic.

While J-Lab is generating website traffic, this is an area in which improvements can be made, particularly given the importance of J-Lab’s websites to its goal of spreading innovation within the journalism field. For example, the chart at right shows that audience survey respondents said they visited J-Lab.org, J-

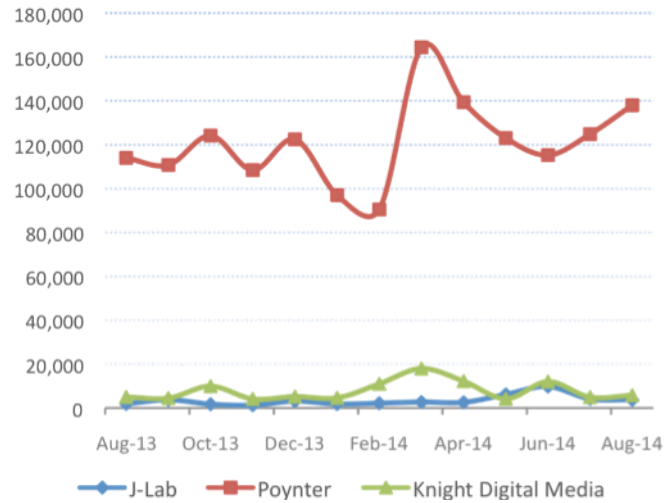
NewVoices.org, and J-Learning.org less than a few times per year, and referred others to the sites even less. Given the frequency with which J-Lab updates the content on these sites, users would have much new information to gain if they visited more frequently.



A comparison to other organizations may also be useful here. As the top chart on the next page shows, J-Lab slightly underperforms the Knight Digital Media Center in terms of unique visitors. Also, although the Poynter Institute is much different than J-Lab in terms of its scope and J-Lab is not expected to return similar website numbers, it is included here to show that substantial potential exists in this area.

One approach for J-Lab to consider to attract more users is a heavier emphasis on site referrals. The middle chart at right shows that most J-Lab website users come directly to the site,¹⁰ and search engines have little impact as a source of traffic. This indicates that the majority of website users are already familiar with J-Lab, and there are fewer new visitors coming to J-Lab sites than is likely desired. A review of the top 10 referral sources for each site shows, with a few exceptions, very little referrals from sites related to journalism (see Appendix C). This indicates a lack of quality affiliate links. J-Lab should work on increasing its referrals from other sites to ensure that they are actively driving in new traffic.

Unique Visitors for J-Lab, Knight Digital Media Center, and Poynter Institute



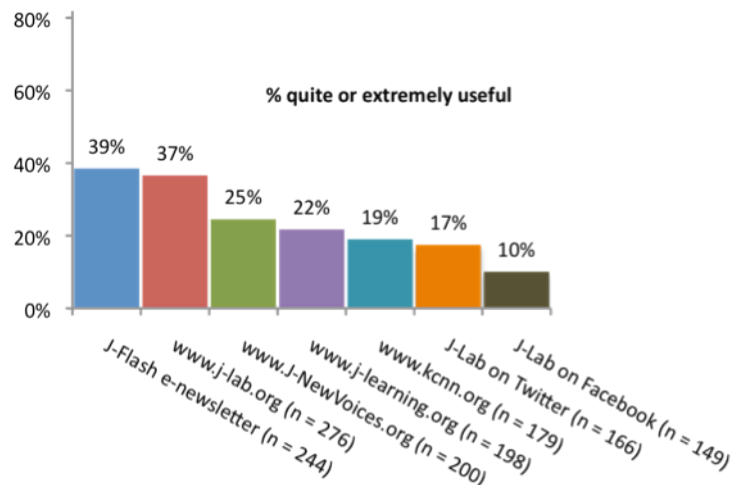
Sources of Website Traffic

Sources of Traffic	J-Lab	J-Learning	J-Newvoices	KCNN
Direct / Bookmarks	83.8%	77.0%	84.7%	89.7%
Referred	11.4%	18.7%	7.5%	4.2%
Search Engines	4.4%	4.0%	6.3%	5.6%
Other	0.4%	0.3%	1.5%	0.5%

J-Lab should review user engagement with its content.

Finally, another strategy for increasing traffic is to examine what is being offered on J-Lab’s sites and how audiences are reacting to them. The bottom graph at right shows audience survey ratings of the usefulness of J-Lab’s websites and other online products in giving them new ideas of keeping them informed of media developments. The J-

Usefulness of Websites and Products in Giving New Ideas or Keeping Informed of Media Developments



¹⁰ There is some noise in this as well – Robots, Spiders and Web Crawlers will show as direct traffic.

Flash newsletter and J-Lab website had the highest percentage of respondents ranking them *quite* or *extremely* useful, with just over a third of respondents providing these ratings. For the other resources, a quarter or less of respondents rated them the same. J-Lab on Facebook was least often seen as useful, with only one in ten respondents rating it as useful (acknowledging that many respondents are likely not Facebook users).

Looking ahead, Google Analytics will be instrumental to helping J-Lab critically review its content. Appendix D outlines key steps for fully leveraging this tool. After completing implementation, J-Lab should use the analytics package to review of how users are consuming content on its sites (a critical missing element of this evaluation because data were lacking). Specifically, this involves grouping similar content into buckets to assess which areas are visited and consumed the most by users. It shows the exact content preferences of site visitors and which areas are stale.

J-Lab should streamline its websites.

While the J-Lab sites provide a wealth of information, the sheer amount of information across multiple sites may be difficult for some to navigate. This is a challenge for J-Lab audiences like busy newsroom editors and site publishers who need on-time and on-demand resources and information. Numerous stakeholders interviewed as well as survey respondents suggested that J-Lab’s websites are “showing their age” and need updating.

A review of J-Lab’s websites revealed that they attempt to perform the same five functions several times mentioned earlier:

J-Lab Websites by Functions

	J-Lab.org	J-Learning.org	J-NewVoices.org	KCNN.org
Information	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education	✓	✓		✓
Grants	✓		✓	✓
Community	✓	✓	✓	✓
Showcase	✓	✓	✓	✓

J-Lab Website Functions by Audience

	Information	Education	Grants	Community	Showcase
J-Schools	✓	✓	✓		✓
J-Students	✓	✓		✓	✓
Journalists	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Researchers	✓				
News Organizations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foundations	✓	✓	✓		✓
Grantees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

- *Information dissemination*: Provide overall content, downloadable materials, and links
- *Education and training*: Provide educational content and training modules
- *Grantmaking*: Help to manage grantmaking
- *Community engagement*: Foster interaction and engagement with audiences¹¹
- *Showcase best practices*: Showcase work by award winners and grantees.

As the top chart on the previous page reveals, several functions are duplicated across J-Lab's sites, which currently are organized primarily around each J-Lab project. This has implications for the websites' usability, including audience accessibility to content. While J-Lab explains that its target audiences are different across its sites, the second chart indicates that each audience has usage requirements that span at least three of the sites. For example, New Voices grantees might have to visit (1) J-NewVoices.org to apply for grants, (2) J-Learning.org or KCNN.org for educational content to support their work, and (3) J-Lab.org, for news, showcases, and other information of interest.

Re-visioning and redesigning websites, particularly when a great deal of content is involved, is a major and resource-intensive undertaking. It is understandable that J-Lab may be reluctant to take on this challenge right now. The need to do this, however, is inevitable. In addition, comments from the audience survey and from the evaluation expert's review of the sites reveal that users want and would benefit from a re-thinking of J-Lab's approach.

The recommendation here is that J-Lab consolidate its websites during a re-design process. Website improvements should also pay attention to the five functions described above and how the website can most effectively serve those functions for J-Lab's audiences. They are a better way to think about website design and structure than project by project. Functions place the users needs and how J-Lab can meet them first, rather than the way in which J-Lab's grants or deliverables are structured. These considerations can go a long way toward improving website usability and attracting users.

¹¹ For example, through Jan's blog on J-Lab.org; Lessons Learned blog on j-newvoices.org; and the forum on J-learning.org.

CONCLUSIONS

J-Lab is a reliable grantee with a known reputation for promoting innovation in the community journalism field. J-Lab's overall brand is strong and well known. It was built on the credible reputation of its founder and executive director, Jan Schaffer.

As an organization J-Lab is getting stronger, but it should pay attention to long-term viability. J-Lab now has a secure position at American University where it can both draw on and contribute to the abundant resources available at the School of Communication (including the faculty and students). In addition, J-Lab has increased its staffing capacity over the last several years. During this next phase, attention to sustainability (through diversification) and long-term succession planning will help to ensure that J-Lab continues to be stable and robust in the years ahead.

The amount of work J-Lab delivers is impressive, particularly for such a small staff. There is no doubt that J-Lab produces high-quality content, and a lot of it. That content comes in many formats, including websites, newsletters, reports, toolkits, documentaries, blogs, Tweets, and so on. New ideas spring up almost daily at J-Lab, and the result is that J-Lab actually "over delivers" on its outputs.

J-Lab's projects have tapped into a strong demand in the field and they deliver results. This is particularly clear for the New Voices and Networked Journalism projects. The sheer demand for these projects (as evidenced through the number of applications that come in) speaks to their reputation and the fact that J-Lab has tapped into a major need in the field. These projects also demonstrate concrete results both quickly and efficiently.

Adjustments to existing J-Lab projects that reflect the evolving field of journalism can ensure J-Lab work remains fresh and continue to push innovation. First and foremost, J-Lab should better define its niche. Also, sustainability and partnerships/collaboration should be major themes in J-Lab's future work.

Many findings connect to the theme of making sure that J-Lab's audiences can get and use the content it delivers. The data collected for this evaluation suggest that many within J-Lab's audiences are

not aware of all that they can get from J-Lab. J-Lab keeps churning out new projects, products, and content, but it is not clear that they always optimize these good ideas and resources by making sure they reach J-Lab audiences (and reach the “right” audiences).

An emphasis on J-Lab’s communications strategy and how content is delivered and to whom will be very beneficial during this next phase of J-Lab’s development. J-Lab may in fact want to bring in an external communications consultant to support the organization in reviewing and thinking through next steps on its strategy.

A big part of thinking through J-Lab’s communications strategy will be critical decisions about J-Lab’s websites and online presence. While it may seem overwhelming to think about how J-Lab can improve its websites, the fact remains that its websites are the main way in which J-Lab engages with its audiences and spread innovation. The need to revisit the websites and how they are designed surfaced repeatedly during data collection. The recommendation here is that J-Lab consolidate its websites and organize a new site around the functions it serves rather than its distinct projects (which change or evolve over time). In fact, J-Lab reports that it is already headed in this direction and plans to follow through on this finding.

J-Lab can be expected to continue to deliver results during its next phase, but the strategic adjustments outlined here can help to increase its impact. This evaluation has identified specific areas in which J-Lab can improve, particularly as it thinks beyond serving the small percentage of innovators and entrepreneurs in the journalism field and tries to educate and motivate the much larger majority of audience members who want to innovate, but only after others have tested the innovations first. The table on the next page summarizes the areas for J-Lab improvement identified through this evaluation, and the recommendations for addressing them.

SUMMARY OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Area for Improvement	Recommendations in Brief
1. J-Lab should be clear about its niche.	Clarify in communications that J-Lab is about advancing the field of <i>community journalism</i> . Identify (at least internally, if not externally) how J-Lab differs from other organizations. Discuss the evolution of J-Lab's niche with the Knight Foundation.
2. J-Lab's emphasis on individual projects confuses perceptions about what the organization does and how it does it.	Clarify how J-Lab does its work. Stop describing J-Lab primarily in terms of its individual projects. Emphasize the five functions that J-Lab performs.
3. 79% of J-Lab's annual budget comes from the Knight Foundation. Thinking long-term, the Knight Foundation and J-Lab should discuss questions about sustainability.	Talk to the Knight Foundation about questions and expectations regarding sustainability. This should be a two-way conversation with both sides sharing thoughts and concerns.
4. J-Lab should also address succession.	Develop a plan.
5. New Voices should evolve to reflect the changing community journalism landscape.	Rather than start new projects that may carry significant new implementation burden, evolve the existing ones. With New Voices, think about changing the application criteria or how grantees receive TA and support.
6. J-Lab startups (both New Voices and Net-J) need direct support on sustainability.	Provide specific technical support on financial sustainability.
7. Additional collaboration can strengthen J-Lab and help it leverage its impact.	Identify <i>new</i> partners that will help J-Lab advance its work in the five function areas.
8. J-Lab should examine its communications strategy and the purposes and roles that each of its channels plays.	Clearly identify J-Lab's audiences and how they can most effectively be reached. Identify how J-Lab wants to use its online presence.
9. J-Lab should explore strategies for improving website traffic.	Identify opportunities for more site referral.
10. J-Lab should review user engagement with its content.	Focus on creating more user engagement and interaction on sites and through social media.
11. J-Lab should consider streamlining its websites.	Substantially improve J-Lab's website presence. Consolidate the websites. Promote and relate J-Lab's five functions rather than its discrete projects.

APPENDIX A

Interview List

J-Lab Staff

Jan Schaffer, Executive Director
Andrew Pergam, Editorial Director
Anna Tausin, Web & Social Media Editor
Todd Van Doren, Assistant Director of Operations

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Eric Newton, Vice President, Journalism Program
John Bracken, Director, Digital Media

J-Lab Stakeholders

Larry Kirkman, Dean, American University School of Communication
Jim Brady, General Manager, TBD.com
Jody Brannon, National Director, Carnegie-Knight News21, Arizona State University
Jane Brown, Executive Director, Robert W. Deutsch Foundation
Amy Eisman, Director of Writing Programs, School of Communication, American University
Charles B. Fancher, President, Fancher Associates Inc.

New Voices Grantees

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>CONTACT</u>	<u>GRANTEE</u>
2009	Rick Hirsch	Senior Editor, Multimedia, Miami Herald
2009	Mark Evans	Editor, TucsonCitizen.com
2009	Bob Payne	Director of Communities, Seattle Times
2009	Steve Gunn	Editor, Innovations and New Projects, Charlotte Observer
2009	Phil Fernandez	Editor, Asheville Citizen-Times

Networked Journalism Grantees

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>CONTACT</u>	<u>GRANTEE</u>	<u>WEBSITE</u>
2009	Kim Grinfeder	Grand Avenue News	GrandAveNews.com
2009	Susan Mernit ¹²	Oakland Local	Oaklandlocal.com
2008	Cherie Snyder	Appalachian Independent	Appindie.org
2008	Paul Glover	Green Jobs Philly	Greenjobsphilly.org
2007	Susie Pender	New Castle NOW	NewCastleNOW.org
2007	Jeff South	Greater Fulton News	Greaterfultonnews.org
2006	David Poulson	Great Lakes Echo	Greatlakesecho.org
2006	Robert Hackett	PolicyOptions.org	Policyoptions.org
2005	Lew Friedland	Madison Commons Project	MadisonCommons.org
2005	Donyale Yvette Hooper-Revis	kaPow!	HipHopSpeaks.org

¹² Data collection took place over email, rather than through a telephone interview.

APPENDIX B

Audience Survey

This survey is part of an independent evaluation that has been commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to help J-Lab determine how it can do its job more effectively. The Knight Foundation routinely asks for these kinds of evaluations for its major projects. It should not take more than 5 minutes to complete. The survey is fully confidential and does not ask for your name or contact information.

1. Please rate your familiarity with each of the following aspects of J-Lab's work.

	1 not at all familiar	2 a little familiar	3 familiar	4 quite familiar	5 extremely familiar	don't know
Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Learning.org, a how-to site for community publishing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knight Citizen News Network, helping citizens and journalists amplify community news	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
New Voices project, providing start-up grants for new citizen media projects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Networked Journalism project, connecting news organizations with hyper-local news sites	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. What words or phrases would you use to describe J-Lab?

3. How often do you visit the following J-Lab web sites?

	1 never	2 less than a few times a year	3 a few times a year	4 about once a month	5 more than once a month	don't know
www.j-lab.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.j-learning.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.kcnn.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.J-NewVoices.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. How often do you refer a staff member, student, or colleague to the following J-Lab web sites?

	1 never	2 less than a few times a year	3 a few times a year	4 about once a month	5 more than once a month	don't know
www.j-lab.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.j-learning.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.kcnn.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.J-NewVoices.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. How useful do you find the following in giving you new ideas or keeping you informed of media developments or opportunities?

	1 not at all useful	2 a little useful	3 useful	4 quite useful	5 extremely useful	don't know/don't use
www.j-lab.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.j-learning.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.kcnn.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
www.J-NewVoices.org	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Flash e-newsletter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab on Facebook	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab on Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	1 strongly disagree	2 disagree	3 neither agree nor disagree	4 agree	5 strongly agree	don't know
I understand J-Lab's mission and all that the organization has to offer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab is helping to transform and re-invent the field of journalism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab promotes cutting-edge ideas in journalism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get information from J-Lab that I cannot get elsewhere.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab's information is easy-to-read and accessible.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Lab offers practical ideas that I can easily apply in my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The amount of information that J-Lab puts out is overwhelming.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Thinking about other organizations and resources that you know about, how important is it for J-Lab to:

	1 not at all important	2 a little important	3 important	4 quite important	5 extremely important	don't know
Offer online training in how to use digital tools to build new opportunities for news and information.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seed and learn from start-up community news ventures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Connect legacy news organizations with community news ventures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Support experimentation and innovation in journalism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. How would you rate the overall usefulness of each organization to your work?

	1 not at all useful	2 a little useful	3 useful	4 quite useful	5 extremely useful
J-Lab	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knight Digital Media Center	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Renaissance Journalism Center	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knight News Challenge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. What might J-Lab do differently, or in addition to what they are doing now, to make their work more useful for you?

10. Which term best describes you? (check all that apply)

- Professional journalist
- Community journalist
- Educator
- Student
- Funder

Other (please describe)

11. How long have you been working in your field?

- Less than a year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- More than 20 years

Please press "Done" below to submit your responses. Thank you!

APPENDIX C

Top 10 Website Referral Sources (August 2010)

J-Lab.org	
	Percent
http://yan-cocktail.com/cgi-local/atlink/atlink.cgi	21.8%
http://www.yan-cocktail.com/cgi-local/atlink/atlink.cgi	11.7%
http://www.reo-group.com/new/atlink/atlink.cgi	3.7%
http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/	2.1%
http://www.facebook.com/l.php	1.7%
http://twitter.com	1.6%
http://www.facebook.com/ajax/emu/f.php	1.4%
http://publishing2.com/what-were-reading/	1.3%
http://www.knightfoundation.org/programs/...	1.3%
http://us.mg5.mail.yahoo.com/dc/blank.html	1.1%

J-Learning.org	
	Percent
http://thetopquest.com	7.1%
http://loanremortgage.net	5.3%
http://freeadhdonlinetest.com	3.9%
http://us.mg5.mail.yahoo.com/dc/blank.html	1.4%
http://twitter.com	1.2%
http://www.makeuseof.com	1.2%
http://mashable.com	1.1%
http://www.facebook.com	1.1%
http://techcrunch.com	1.1%
http://www.wikipedia.org	1.1%

J-NewVoices.org	
	Percent
http://www.knightfoundation.org/programs/...	8.5%
http://www.j-lab.org	7.2%
http://perzyko.co.cc/sitemap.html	5.6%
http://perzyko.co.cc/foto-pizda-drochit.html	3.5%
http://nubepo.5gigs.net/sitemap.html	3%
http://metern.wpaski.com/cats-8-1.html	2.9%
http://metern.wpaski.com/pizda-volasataya.html	2.9%
http://mypizdyk.co.cc/sitemap.html	2.5%
http://www.bing.com/search	2.2%
http://perzyko.co.cc/fer-13-1.html	1.9%

KCNN.org	
	Percent
http://www.valez.ru/post38404206/	7.6%
http://translate.googleusercontent.com/...	5.8%
http://www.j-learning.org	3.5%
http://www.j-lab.org	3.1%
http://us.mg5.mail.yahoo.com/dc/blank.html	2.8%
http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search	2.4%
http://www.journalism20.com/blog/	2%
http://www.centerforinvestigativereporting.org/	2%
...	
http://www.facebook.com/l.php	1.6%
http://knightcenter.utexas.edu/journalism20.php	1.6%

APPENDIX D

Google Analytics Implementation: Recommendations

Google Analytics is a free tool to help website owners dig deeper into how visitors are using and interacting with the content on their site. It is known to be a solid tool, providing almost all of the functionality offered by commercial enterprise grade alternatives.

J-Lab's current implementation of Google Analytics is very basic. Most of the key components are not yet enabled. Below is a checklist of actions to ensure maximum benefit from the tool.

The Code

1. Switch to the new Google Analytics Asynchronous Tracking Code.

- This is a newer version of the code than is currently being used. It improves tracking performance and page load times.

<http://code.google.com/apis/analytics/docs/tracking/asyncTracking.html>

2. Use a Global Variable in the Expression Engine CMS to inject Google Analytics Code on every page.

This is critical. The absence of Google Analytics code on some key pages renders the data almost useless. All pages need to have the code installed either via a global inclusion (as proposed below) or individually.

- Set up a global variable that holds the Google analytics code. Then add it to an "include" element common to every page, typically in the page header. Make sure the include element is used on all pages. The include variable needs to be set up for each site.

3. Set up the code to create a roll up account.

J-Lab has correctly set up a separate Google Analytics account for each site. A global roll up account that aggregates metrics from all sites into one view is now recommended. This provides excellent insight into aggregated metrics across the five sites (e.g. total unique visitors, visits, and page views). It also provides insight into visits across sites. This setup is typically done within the raw Google Analytics code. (This will affect the structure of the code used on all five sites.)

Configuration

4. Create filters for each site account.

Filters are important tweaks made to the underlying data. The important ones are:

- Have one account with no filter at all (the current configuration).

- Create a filter for employee/J-Lab staff data. This might not be as important given J-Lab's small size. <http://analytics.blogspot.com/2009/06/back-to-basics-filtering-out-your-own.html>
- Force URL case to lower case. Add this filter to make sure that you don't have the same page appear twice in your data, because in one instance the URL is upper case and in another it is lower case.
- Display full referral names. Add this filter to display the full name of the referring site to tell where traffic came from.

5. Setup Goals for each site account.

- Identify the most important goals or action items J-Lab would like site visitors to perform on each site. Using goals in Google Analytics, J-Lab can track activities around each of these actions. Interesting goals to track are:
 - Comment submissions
 - Sharing via social networks
 - Newsletter subscriptions
 - RSS Feed subscriptions
 - Downloads
 - Submit an application
 - See showcase pages
- <http://analytics.blogspot.com/2009/05/how-to-setup-goals-in-google-analytics.html>

6. Create Profiles in each account to gain specific visibility into interesting segments.

Recommended are:

- Profile for social media traffic
- Profile for referred traffic
- Profile for search engine traffic

7. Fix site Search tracking configuration.

- Site search tracking is not correctly set up. The value for the "Query Parameter" field should be "q," which represents the value in the URL string showing a search query parameter.

Strategy

8. Create useful content segments to drive further analysis.

- Using the advanced segmentation feature in Google Analytics, create groupings of important content areas and compare using several metrics to gauge utility.