



**A DECADE OF THE  
KNIGHT NEWS  
CHALLENGE:  
INVESTING IN  
INNOVATORS TO  
ADVANCE NEWS,  
MEDIA, AND  
INFORMATION**

PRESENTED TO



**KNIGHT  
FOUNDATION**

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# **INTRODUCTION AND MAJOR FINDINGS**

Over the last two decades, technology has transformed the way consumers interact with news and media, including how they create, consume, and share information. These advances have challenged traditional media organizations to adapt the way they deliver content to stay relevant to readers, fulfill their missions, and sustain their work. In 2006, the Knight Foundation launched the Knight News Challenge (KNC) to invest in new ideas and individuals to support innovation in news and information. Since its launch, the KNC has provided more than \$48 million to fund 139 projects in the United States and around the world.



To better understand how the Challenge impacted winners<sup>1</sup>, their projects, and the broader fields of news, media, and journalism, Arabella Advisors conducted a retrospective evaluation of the last 10 years of the KNC (2006–2016)<sup>2</sup>. Through this research, we identified ways the Challenge has impacted the field and its winners, including:

## **Enabling and Advancing Innovators in Journalism and the Media**

The KNC helped to support a group of individuals and organizations working at the nexus of technology and journalism and, in large part, has kept those individuals within the media field. Of all winners, 84 percent remain in the fields of journalism, technology and, media. Most hold top leadership positions in their organizations. For many individuals, the KNC afforded the resources and imprimatur to devote themselves to a new enterprise or project entirely.

## **Bringing New Standards to Journalism**

KNC participants imported technology-infused standards into the practice of journalism. Winners cited the Challenge's "open-source" ethic, its focus on complex data, and its citizen/user orientation as essential contributions to the wider field of journalism.

## **Driving Open Data**

More specifically, the KNC advanced civic technology projects that expanded access to data. The largest proportion of winning projects were focused on data access, and the KNC was responsible for launching several civic technology companies focused on this issue.

## **Building a Network of Innovators**

The KNC successfully engendered a sense of community, which positively impacted winners' work during and after the Challenge. Since winning the Challenge, 60 percent of winners have promoted or featured the work of another winner, 55 percent have provided technical expertise to another winner, and 48 percent have collaborated directly on a project with another winner.

**"The early days of the Knight News Challenge were a breath of fresh air. There was a growing community of people [trying to innovate in journalism], but the community was insular and not well-respected. The Knight News Challenge helped change that by putting innovation at center stage." — KNC Winner**



This retrospective evaluation also identified factors critical to winners' initial and ongoing success. Though the assets and hurdles of projects varied, the following arose as particularly influential:

## Sustainability

Taking projects from inception to sustainability has been an issue for many winners. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) cited funding as a significant challenge. Only 1 percent of projects reported stable funding as an asset at the outset of their project, and 61 percent were solely funded by Knight. At present, a third are dependent on a small number of funders and another 26 percent report difficulties in securing new funding.

**61%**  
of projects were  
solely funded by  
Knight.

## Strategic Partnerships

Only about a third of funded projects had access to successful partnerships at the time of the KNC award. Anecdotally, this seemed to be an important factor in some of the successes (and some of the failures). Those who forged strong partnerships — especially partnerships that provided them access to users — were more likely to succeed than their peers who did not.

## Technical Expertise

While nearly all projects had technology at the center, the most commonly cited obstacle in grant reporting was lack of technical expertise or the emergence of technical issues (37 percent of winners).

In this report, we provide additional detail on the impact the KNC has had on its winners and the broader fields of journalism, news, and media. We review the KNC projects to date, share insights on how the Challenge affected its winners' growth and professional development, and highlight the ways in which it has catalyzed change within the field. To understand what the KNC accomplished and may have yet to accomplish, we highlight trends among winners and share examples of how projects have both succeeded and struggled over the last 10 years.



# **OVERVIEW OF KNIGHT NEWS CHALLENGE WINNERS**

Today, KNC winners overwhelmingly continue to work in journalism and technology. Overall, 82 people remain at their projects (59 percent of 139 winners) and 57 people have left their projects to go onto something else (41 percent). Of those who have left their projects, 84 percent remain in the fields of journalism, technology, and media. Eighty-five winners hold top leadership positions in their organizations, 75 of whom are in the fields of journalism, technology, and media.

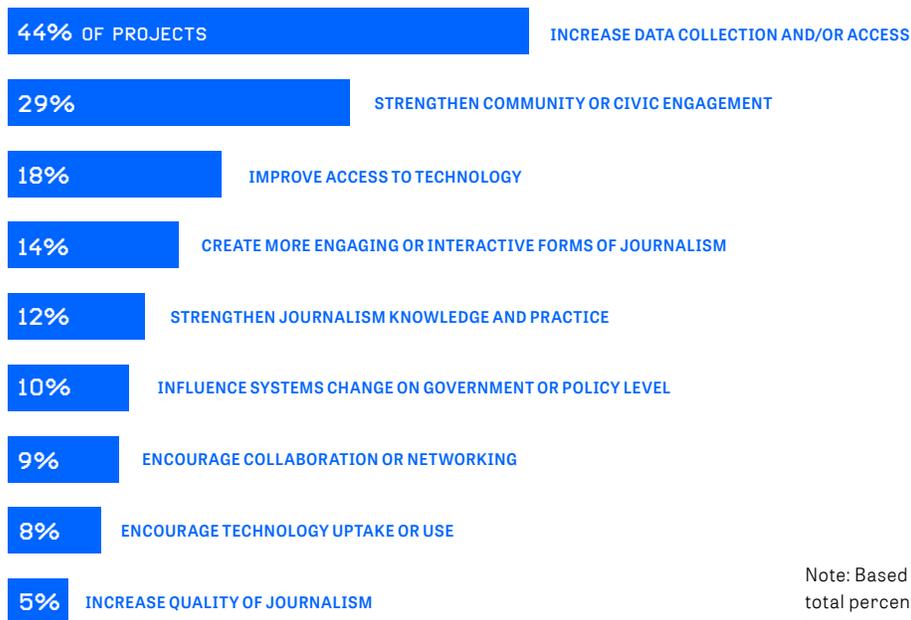
While these winners now contribute to a wide range of organizations and issues within journalism and technology, KNC's grant portfolio indicates clear trends as to where these winners, and their projects, first began. The following section provides detail on KNC projects' goals, target users, leaders, status, and the assets and hurdles that influenced projects' relative success.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

### Project Goals

Of the 139 KNC winning projects, nearly two-thirds focused on increasing access to data, improving data collecting systems, or strengthening civic or community engagement. Projects focused on increasing access to data or improving data collection systems aim to promote transparency and community knowledge. For example, Professor Sharad Goel's work at Stanford University increases access to information on public interactions with law enforcement by compiling, analyzing, and releasing a dataset of more than 100 million highway patrol stops throughout the country — helping journalists, policymakers, and the public understand trends in how the public interacts with law enforcement.

FIGURE 1: PROJECT GOALS



Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016. The total percentage of projects exceeds 100 percent because each could have multiple goals.

Similarly, projects focused on strengthening civic or community engagement help individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and resources to be active participants within their own communities. For example, in Philadelphia, the Youth Outreach Adolescent Community Awareness Program trained barbers to educate their clients on issues relating to civic engagement and restoration of rights. Through this train-the-trainer model, the project helped community members, many of whom were formerly incarcerated individuals, learn more about potential avenues for civic participation.

Knight Foundation invested widely in innovation, and it is difficult to summarize its impact given the variety of projects it has supported over the past decade. The goals above best summarize the various streams of Knight's work, and provide insight into its major efforts. For example, we can confidently say that Knight's investments increased the collection, access, and use of data to solve all kinds of problems from transparent sourcing for journalism, to police violence in Chicago, to eligibility for welfare benefits in states across the nation. Many winning projects also used technology to empower and engage communities; for example, training people in villages across India to produce local news using mobile phones and providing tools for people to measure water and air quality in their own communities.

## Themes

When the KNC launched, it issued an open call for innovative ideas for using digital news and information. Through this call, the foundation aimed to source a wide range of ideas. In 2012, the Challenge changed its format, issuing multiple calls for proposals each year with each call targeting a specific theme. These themes ranged from making data more available, understandable, and actionable to helping libraries serve 21st-century information needs. The foundation hypothesized that organizing the challenge by these themes could help target its impact, build networks of similarly focused organizations, and allow for a more flexible timeline that would provide innovators with faster access to funding.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 2: PROJECTS BY THEME**

Cohort Type	# of Projects	% of Projects
Not Applicable*	69	50%
Libraries	13	9%
Data	12	9%
Elections	11	8%
Mobile	8	6%
Open Internet	8	6%
Health	7	5%
OpenGov	7	5%
Networks	4	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016. Projects denoted with an asterisk (\*) do not have a cohort because Knight funded them prior to 2012. Knight also made one grant (to Quiet Riddle Ventures) that was not assigned to a cohort in its database.

While each cohort size is too small to indicate significant impact on the field, there are examples of how themed cohorts produced similar change in their targeted communities. For example, in 2012, the KNC solicited mobile-based ideas that harness mobile technology to inform and engage communities. Among the theme's eight grantees, three projects (WeFarm, RootIO, and Digital Democracy) focused on increasing access to and use of mobile technology and information in low-technology communities abroad. Each organization has continued to persist and today, their mobile technologies serve hundreds of thousands of users around the world. WeFarm's simple mobile platform serves 141,000 farmers per year across Kenya, Uganda, and Peru and was named one of Fast Company's 10 most innovative companies in Africa in 2017. After launching four stations in Uganda, RootIO's smartphone-based platform has been commissioned to launch 24 more stations in two countries over the next year. Digital Democracy's mobile technologies now map efforts in three countries across 400,000 hectares of land.

The similarity among winning projects allowed for deeper peer learning and more generative collaboration. Isabel Sheinman from Library For All marveled at the ingenuity of bringing together nascent library projects with historic institutions such as the New York Public Library. She saw the effect of this as bigger than the sum of its parts: by convening different actors within a field, Knight was encouraging cohort members to find synergy and opportunities for collaboration, and they did. Library For All was building a platform for a digital library accessible to PCs, Androids, and feature phones. Through participating in the KNC, Sheinman and her team learned of the New York Public Library's open source library platform, which Library For All was able to adapt to fit its needs, instead of building one from scratch.

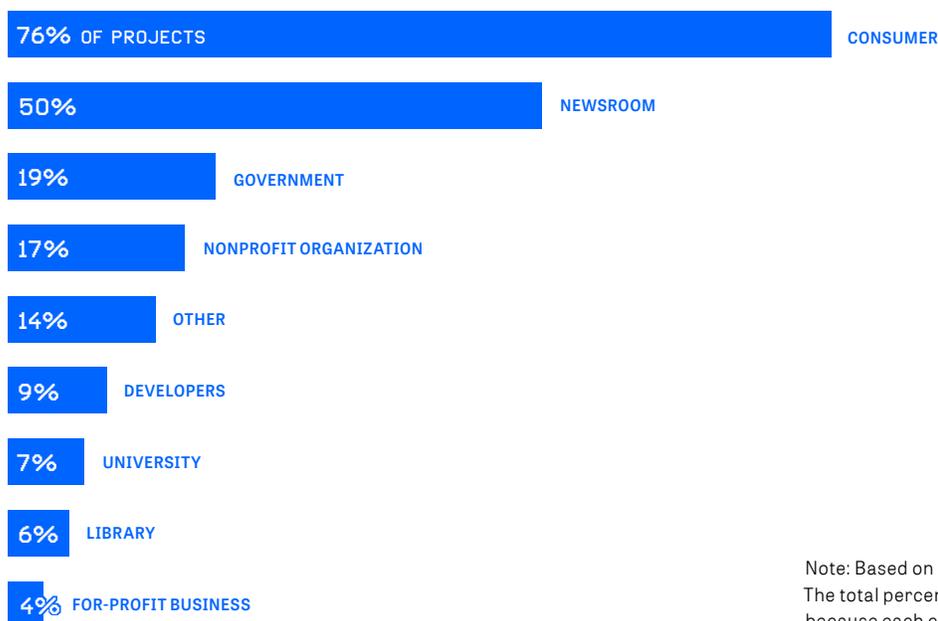
## Target User

The majority of KNC projects created products, services, or ideas targeted at consumers (76 percent) and newsrooms (50 percent). As noted above, projects focused on consumers often increased the public's access to information, with the goal of improving citizens' knowledge, civic engagement, or well-being. For example, a few winning projects in the Libraries cohort, such as Chicago Public Library Foundation or the New York Public Library Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, provided families with free internet access and digital skills training that allowed them to explore education, career, and other critical activities online in order to achieve their personal goals and improve their quality of life.

Other projects focused on newsrooms' access to information and technology. Through projects like Open Knowledge Foundation, which created tools to increase journalists' fiscal literacy and access to public spending data, or Campaign Hound, which built an archive for journalists to search local election speeches, newsrooms gained access to new technologies and information that could improve their reporting and relationships with consumers.

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**FIGURE 3: PROJECTS BY TARGET USER**



Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016. The total percentage of projects exceeds 100% because each could have multiple target users.

## Project Lead Organization

Of the 139 KNC-winning projects, nearly half were hosted by nonprofit organizations. Individuals (21 percent) and for-profit businesses (22 percent) also made up a significant portion of project leads. Winning projects were led by a range of entities, from established, traditional news organizations, such as the Associated Press, to individuals who had innovative ideas but lacked the capital to implement them.

**FIGURE 4: TYPE OF LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

Lead Organization	# of Projects	% of Projects
Nonprofit organization	60	43%
For-profit business	30	22%
Individual	29	21%
University	14	10%
Library	5	4%
Government	1	1%
Total	139	100%

Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016.

This diversity in the types of entities the KNC funded reflects the notion that anyone, no matter their experience or background, could contribute to innovation. Through its investments in a broad range of entities and entrepreneurs, the KNC helped expand the idea of who could be active

contributors to and participants in journalism and news — and who should receive philanthropic support to do so. For example, Nadav Aharony of Behavio assumed he would need to create a nonprofit to launch his project, but Knight Foundation staff members encouraged him to launch it as a for-profit instead, which he ultimately found was a more sustainable approach. Another winner saw his Challenge award as an investment in building his presence in the industry, an impact that lasted beyond his individual project.

## PROJECT STATUS

Of the projects that the KNC seeded and supported for which we have data (103 projects), 73 percent remained active at the end of the grant year (according to final grant reports). Only eight of these projects folded at the end of their grant because they did not reach their goals or otherwise could not gain traction. An additional 20 ended their work at the conclusion of the grant because they had met their goals (e.g., hosted a convening, developed a tool) or evolved.<sup>4</sup>

**FIGURE 5: PROJECT STATUS AT END OF FUNDING**

Project Status (At End of Grant)	# of Projects	% of Projects
Active (At a Lower Level)	10	10%
Active (Expanding)	31	30%
Active (Maintaining)	34	33%
Closed (Completed)	16	16%
Closed (Evolved)	4	4%
Closed (Faltered)	8	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Based on a document review of 103 projects from 2006-2016. This table does not include 18 current grants at time of analysis, and another 18 for which there were no data available.

In July and August 2017, we conducted a survey of KNC winners, in which we learned that 59 percent of the 73 projects in which they were involved continued after their Knight News Challenge grant ended.

**FIGURE 6: PROJECT STATUS AS OF JULY 2017**

Project Status (Current)	# of Projects	% of Projects
Active	43	59%
Closed at End of Grant	14	19%
Closed Since End of Grant	16	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: Based on survey responses and document review of projects from 2006-2016. This table does not include 48 projects for which there were no data available or the 18 current grants.

It is impressive how many projects KNC seeded have continued — especially given that only 18 of the 139 have received reinvestment by Knight over the past decade. The projects that have continued beyond Knight’s initial support have grown and succeeded in many ways. Survey respondents from active projects (55)<sup>5</sup>, including those with active grants, reported the following:

**84%**  
of KNC projects say they have increased their user base.

- 84 percent say they have increased their user base.
- 66 percent say they recruited partners who are important to their success.
- 64 percent say they have succeeded in marketing to potential users.
- 53 percent have grown their project team.
- 47 percent say they have a team with the right skills to advance the project.

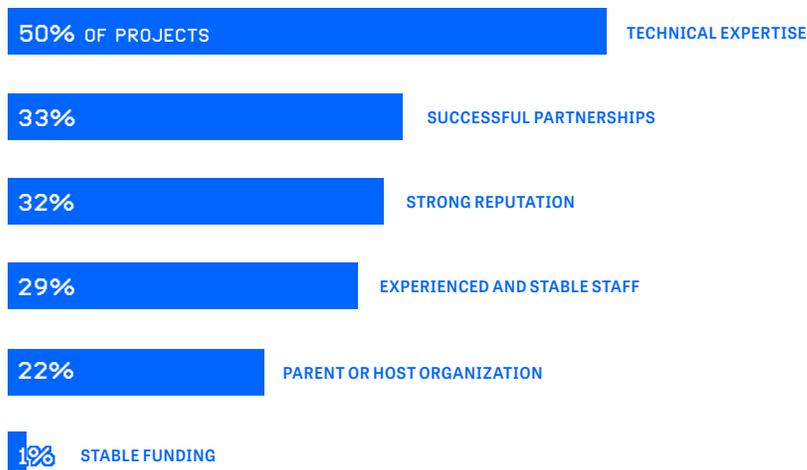
Overall, these data suggest that Challenge winners’ projects are continuing to expand and have the assets we know matter most: users and partners.

## ASSETS AND HURDLES

### Assets During the KNC

As mentioned above, across winning projects, we found that having a support system — either through successful partnerships or a stable and supportive parent organization — helped projects maintain stability and achieve their outcomes. These two factors were positively correlated with higher levels of achieved outcomes among winning projects during the grant year. Both of these assets were prevalent in our data, surpassed only by technical expertise, which is necessary but not sufficient for a successful venture.

FIGURE 7: PROJECT ASSETS AT TIME OF GRANT



Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016. The total percentage of projects exceeds 100 percent because projects could have multiple assets.

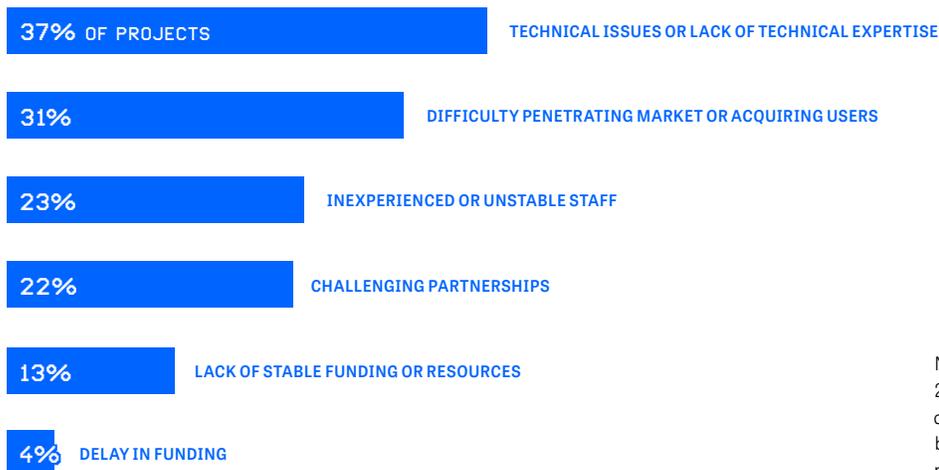
Though we cannot read causality into the correlation we found, we suspect that partnerships may be correlated with more achieved outcomes because having the support of partners and access to their resources can build projects' resilience to problems. For many projects, partnerships are essential to their business model. For example, mRelief's tool to self-assess benefit eligibility took off when California, Illinois, and New York adopted it. The platform grew during the KNC from hosting 5,000 users to 144,000.<sup>6</sup> On the flip side, when potential partners aren't willing to participate, it can derail a project.

Parent organizations provide resources and infrastructure that make it easier for the project team to focus on project work, instead of building and running an organization. These organizations help incubate winning projects and provide them with resources such as financial support, staff time, supplies and materials, or office space. One success story is the Center for Civic Media, which was launched via a KNC grant to MIT. The center continues operations to this day and has since hosted many other News Challenge winners and their projects.

## Struggles During the KNC

The most prevalent impediments winners reported during their grant period were a lack of technical expertise (37 percent) and difficulty acquiring users (31 percent).

**FIGURE 8: PROJECTS' CHALLENGES AT TIME OF GRANT**



Note: Based on 139 projects from 2006-2016. The total percentage of projects exceed 100 percent because projects could have multiple challenges.

As discussed above, technical expertise is necessary to executing a project; projects cannot succeed without staff members who have the necessary skills to execute and overcome technical problems. While about half of projects throughout the KNC cited technical experience as an asset, there were significantly more projects that cited it as a barrier in the earlier years of the Challenge. From 2007 to 2010, 45 percent of 55 projects reported technical expertise as a hurdle. Once Knight Foundation began screening for technical experience at the outset of the KNC in 2011, this decreased to only 32 percent of 84 projects from 2011 to 2016. Projects also cannot survive without getting traction with intended users. A quarter of all projects (24 percent) reported they had trouble penetrating the market or acquiring users.

## **Sustainability: A Challenge Then and Now**

Winning projects struggled with sustainability both during and after the Challenge in a number of ways. As discussed above, securing users is necessary for many projects to sustain. In response to our winners survey in July-August 2017, 39 percent said securing users was challenging.

During their grant period, only 13 percent of the KNC winners flagged funding as an obstacle, likely because Knight's support was generous enough for them to carry out their work. However, 65 percent of winners reported in our 2017 survey that funding has been a significant challenge. Furthermore, of those who remained at their projects after the Challenge (39 respondents)<sup>7</sup>, nearly a third say they are dependent on a small number of funders (with some noting that the overall pool of potential funders is small). Another 26 percent report they have had trouble securing new funding.

A few survey respondents and interviewees noted that it can be difficult for Challenge projects to access that next big round of funding — especially as the purpose of the Challenge is to spark innovation, not sustain projects. One interviewee observed that the Challenge has been criticized for how it “privileges innovation ... over outcomes and sustainability.” While there is still benefit to those investments that do not sustain, as the winners above have shared, there is also loss.

## **Learning from Adversity**

In a way, Knight's “portfolio” approach to funding, as one fellow funder called it, assumes that there will be some failures, but even winners who faced significant difficulties succeeded in some way. This group tends to take entrepreneurial mindsets to hurdles, viewing them as learning experiences to build upon. It is thus hard to identify a project that “failed,” as nearly all have achieved some substantive outcomes and others contributed to innovations that took off elsewhere. For example, some winners set out to develop technology that either already existed, or that someone subsequently developed better, but they were still able to establish proof of concept, develop components that subsequent projects adopted, or gain experience and knowledge that helped them in their next venture:

- Scott Rosenberg, co-founder of Salon.com and the founder of KNC winning project Mediabugs, acknowledged that “Mediabugs didn’t change the world; it didn’t even really take off, but it provided proof of concept that you could borrow ideas from the realm of software development (in our case, a bug tracker) to enrich journalism. It also focused a spotlight on one way that newsrooms could tackle the problem of failing public trust.” Rosenberg says that he continues to borrow concepts and practices from the software field in his work as an editor and writer.
- Amy Gahrn of Boulder Carbon Tax Tracker said that although her project didn’t take off, winning the Challenge connected her with the foundation, and for nine years, she worked for the Knight Digital Media Center.
- Aaron Presnall of VIDI Dataviz said that his project produced the first major set of Dataviz tools for Drupal and secured thousands of users. Since then, many more tools have emerged, but he sees his project as “breaking a bottleneck” that helped to usher these others in.
- Jon Vidar of Tiziano 360 created a platform that allowed people to access local news and content from across the world, for example, to see photos of Iraq, taken by Iraqis. Instagram obviated this, but Tiziano was an important precursor.

**“A lot of the KNC projects might not have long-term success, but they have their moments of success, which then spur the next innovation ... But if you’re going to invest in that moment, how do you continue to invest in the next moment? Our project could have [pivoted], but we didn’t have funding or support to keep going, so we just kind of stopped.” — KNC winner**



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# **KNIGHT NEWS CHALLENGE IMPACT ON WINNERS**

By investing in the ideas of entrepreneurs, Knight has helped to launch careers for some participants and to take others to the next level. Overall, participants say the award helped them launch or scale their projects, enhanced their credibility in the field, and gave them a network of peers who helped them think differently about their work.

## PROVIDING FLEXIBLE RESOURCES TO HELP WINNERS LAUNCH PROJECTS — AND SOMETIMES, THEIR CAREERS

Half of survey respondents said the KNC's biggest impact on the field was simply bringing something into existence that wasn't before. Winning a Knight News Challenge grant meant that winners could quit their current jobs and focus full-time on their project, hire staff members, pilot programs or products — whatever they needed to advance their idea. Knight's early investments allowed projects to gain momentum by building a user base, developing partnerships, and bringing in other revenue — and without Knight's support, many say their projects never would have started in the first place, or would have stalled.

Through the KNC, 27 winners (19 percent) were able to start new projects. Today, a full 84 percent of winners continue to work in the fields of journalism, technology, or media, and 61 percent of winners across fields hold leadership positions. Winners have also worked in the fields of analytics, civic engagement, community development, finance, government, health, higher education, nonprofit development, research, and youth development.

For many projects, Knight funding was the bridge from startup to successful company. For example, Civic Insight already had a community rallied around its platform that engaged members in improving their neighborhoods through providing information about vacant properties in New Orleans, but the website didn't have any resources. After winning the Challenge, the website developed into a company that was acquired and now serves hundreds of cities.

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**“It was huge to get the News Challenge grant. It allowed us to bring on new team members. [It] gave us the funding we needed for the 18 months to do a lot of experimented testing. And in that time, we then were able to bring in earned income.” – KNC winner**



The KNC launched not only projects and businesses, but also careers. One winner who now builds open source data systems for journalists was a sophomore in college when he won the News Challenge. Through the networks he built with the Challenge, he went to graduate school at MIT, and he says his entire career was kicked off by the KNC. Another says that winning the Challenge allowed him to become a founder of an endeavor, which fundamentally changed his career. He says he is always thinking about his next venture, and “starting a company [through the News Challenge] kicked [his] whole trajectory into motion.”

Part of what allowed winners to succeed in launching and testing their ideas was the flexibility Knight provided in how it structured its grants. There was no prescribed definition of success — nor an expectation that winners would do what they set out to do. Knight trusted them to follow their ideas wherever they might take them.

## **ENHANCING WINNERS' CREDIBILITY TO HELP THEM SECURE FUTURE FUNDING**

Those who participated in the News Challenge gained more than just a chance to turn a good idea into a great project. Winners say that the award gave them credibility in the field, and that helped them to attract both attention and funding. When asked how Knight Foundation has helped winners advance their projects during and after the award, 78 percent of the 75 survey respondents said that the award enhanced their credibility due to their affiliation with the foundation.<sup>8</sup> For example, Code2040, which trains and supports Black and Latinx students to enter the innovation economy, won one of the largest Challenge awards in its cohort, just two years into its tenure as an organization in 2014. Laura Weidman Powers, CEO and co-founder, says that this validated both the organization and the importance diversity and inclusion in tech. She says, “the dollars were absolutely critical, and the fact that they came from Knight and in such a public way was extremely valuable as well.”

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A number of interview respondents (both winners and experts) linked the credibility winners received from winning the Challenge to funding they subsequently received. For example, Isabel Sheinman shared the struggle her digital library faced: it had secured some funding, had a promising idea and some traction behind it, but larger funders didn't want to invest until the company's readership grew. Knight invested in the idea and helped it take off, making it more attractive to others. Another winner was able to use the Knight grant to build a platform for community journalism, and with that built, successfully solicited funding from others for in-field programs using the platform.

Funders we interviewed agree that winning the KNC indicates that the winner is a credible contributor to the field. Stacy Donohue of Omidyar Network noted that a KNC award is a “mark of endorsement that this idea has some legs and has been reviewed by a set of thought leaders in the field,” giving her confidence that a potential grantee is well-vetted and making her more likely to take a second look.

## **BUILDING A NETWORK OF INNOVATORS WHO COLLABORATE AND LEARN TOGETHER**

KNC winners also develop lasting relationships with others in the Knight network, which provide them with connections to advance their careers and projects, as well as interlocutors that help them to think differently about their own initiatives. In fact, individuals in the KNC community are collaborating with one another years after their Challenge ended. The majority of survey respondents reported that they had promoted or featured the work of another winner (60 percent) and provided technical assistance or professional support to another member (55 percent). Nearly half (48 percent) have collaborated on a project with another winner. One winner who left his project to start a creative agency said he found clients through the Knight network. Another said he later hired someone he met through the Knight network, who brought needed technical expertise to a journalistic endeavor. The networks the KNC has helped winners build have sustained over time, and according to one winner, “people will continue to feed ideas and opportunities back and forth for years to come.”

**60%**  
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of another winner.

The News Challenge also provides a ready-made community for those who were previously working outside of journalism, media, and information — or at the margins of it. One citizen journalist and activist said the challenge gave him a peek into a news community that he otherwise would not have had.

While the foundation also organizes skill-building workshops focused on what winners need to launch and manage a business (e.g., fundraising, business acumen, technical expertise), only a minority of survey respondents cited these as benefits of Knight-sponsored convenings. Participating in the Knight network supports organizations by connecting them to collaborators, rather than imbuing them with skills to develop and manage organizations and products.<sup>9</sup>

The way Knight runs the Challenge also has built-in ways to connect communities. For example, one interviewee noted that the public nature of the application process, in which applications are posted online for public comment, feeds the community. Current and aspiring members are able to see new ideas in the field, and learn even from those that do not get funded. And through the public comment process, all applicants get access to the collective knowledge and wisdom of the Knight community.

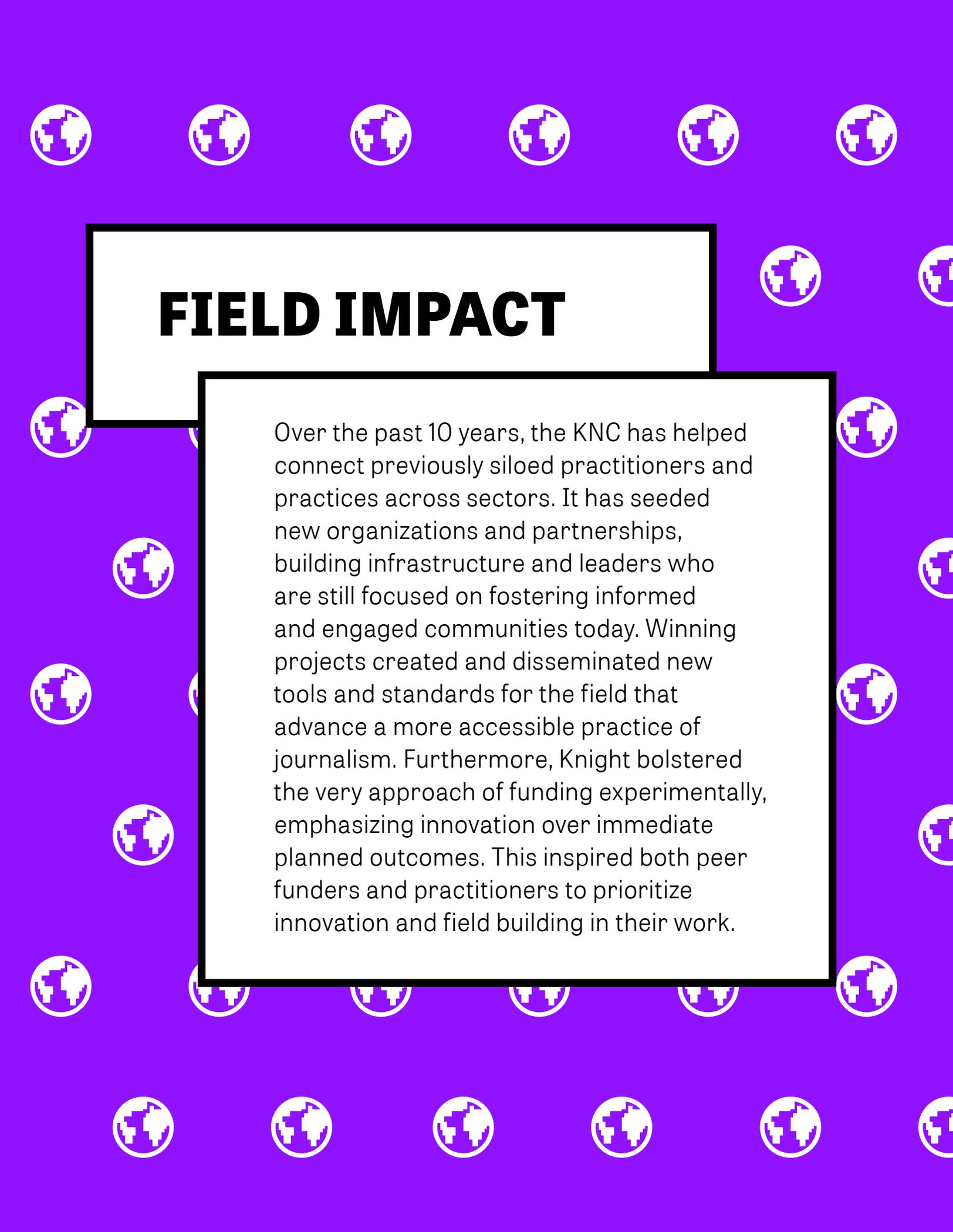
Knight also includes the community in selecting Challenge winners each year, bringing together a panel of field experts — including past winners — to inform the selection. Winners who participated in these panels were more likely to report on the 2017 survey that this engagement (in comparison to winner convenings) helped them to improve their fundraising skills and develop business acumen by learning about how other projects pitch their work and how they are assessed.

While the foundation invites winners into the community in many ways, both during and after the Challenge, some said the Knight community can be “cliquish.” There were three winners who reported that they felt isolated or excluded from the Knight network, which they perceived as exclusive and invite-only.

Across winners surveyed, there was widespread support for Knight deepening its network-building efforts: more than half of respondents said they wanted more opportunities for collaboration after grants end (59 percent), alumni events at conferences (58 percent), and an official alumni network (51 percent). Two winners provided straightforward suggestions for increasing post-Challenge connections: start a Facebook group and create a searchable contact database that includes information about interests and areas of expertise. Both of these would be open to all winners, and thus might help to combat the perception of the KNC community as exclusive.

**“Some of our core collaborators on our source code are people who have also worked on other Knight projects. There’s this whole ecosystem of people who are really committed to using tech for similar social impact.” — KNC winner**





# FIELD IMPACT

Over the past 10 years, the KNC has helped connect previously siloed practitioners and practices across sectors. It has seeded new organizations and partnerships, building infrastructure and leaders who are still focused on fostering informed and engaged communities today. Winning projects created and disseminated new tools and standards for the field that advance a more accessible practice of journalism. Furthermore, Knight bolstered the very approach of funding experimentally, emphasizing innovation over immediate planned outcomes. This inspired both peer funders and practitioners to prioritize innovation and field building in their work.

## CONNECTING PRACTICES AND PRACTITIONERS ACROSS SECTORS

The KNC helped connect individuals across different fields, such as technology, journalism, media, civic engagement and democracy, public libraries, nonprofits, and government. Twenty-eight percent of winners who completed our survey indicated that a significant impact of the KNC is its success in bridging the fields of technology and journalism, especially by bringing technologists' skillsets to bear on journalism. Without harnessing technology — including code, products, and tools for data collection, management, and access — information would not be able to benefit the breadth of consumers that it does today. The KNC played an important role in this rise in information accessibility. For example, one winner described how early grants to EveryBlock, ProPublica, DocumentCloud, and Northwestern University “helped shape the past 10 years of technology-enabled journalism... by releasing code, products, and programs that set new standards and created a new pipeline of technologists who could do or otherwise support journalism.”

**“KNC support has deepened cross-fertilization between journalists and technologists, enhancing their understanding of needs, capabilities, and abilities to experiment with use cases.”**  
— KNC Winner



The Center for Technology and Civic Life bridged technology, information access, and civic engagement and democracy by creating a toolkit that empowers election officials to civically engage people in their communities. Election officials from every state accessed the toolkit to engage and inform voters, and the awardee developed three additional resources for the field: a voting timer app, a polling place resource planner, and a tool to display election results.

Ushahidi is another winning project that compellingly brought technology to bear on information accessibility with KNC support. The organization used its 2011 award to develop an open-source platform to identify accurate citizen information sources during crises. Although the platform itself did not sustain, Ushahidi incorporated lessons from its development into other applications, and it is used today to bolster information access in a wide variety of contexts. Users have deployed Ushahidi to verify and report on more than 150 incidents of violence, hate speech or threats, and harassment across the United States in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. South Floridians recently used Ushahidi to aggregate and map citizen data to help with preparation, survival, and recovery during Hurricane Irma.

In addition to bridging technology and journalism, a dozen respondents also highlighted how the KNC supported innovators in using media to strengthen democracy, and several others cited connections made between nonprofits and technology, and between libraries and other public agencies. As a result, the Challenge helped the community it created discover cross-sector approaches to improving information and media access. A field leader interviewee explained how the KNC “connected the open data world, the civic world, the journalism world, and the library world in a certain way that’s made it possible to see those things as all parts of the same system.”

In some cases, News Challenge grants allowed winners to influence high-level policy discussions, contributing important community-centric perspectives. For example, one winner described how “Knight has helped to position libraries as key stakeholders in city, state, and federal policy discussions. With our project, for the first time that I know of, the public library had a seat at the table with the mayor and the council speaker in conversations about major criminal justice reform. I can’t imagine that happening without the investment from Knight.” In addition, several winners surveyed noted that bridging disparate fields brought new people into the field of journalism. One field leader explained how “[the KNC] has surfaced people, even if they don’t win or even if the idea doesn’t move forward ... they might get involved in a field that they otherwise wouldn’t have.” For example, Brian Boyer of the PANDA project had a background in web software development, and broke into the data journalism field with early funding from Knight that enabled him to attend graduate school. He wrote, this “kickstarted my career as a journalist, along with many others who benefited from the grant.” Later, Boyer won a KNC award to develop the PANDA project, during which, he wrote, “our team learned a lot and all went on to bigger and better things. The same can be said of many of the people in my cohort.”

## **TAKING A CHANCE ON NEW IDEAS**

The News Challenge’s funding and support also built new infrastructure and developed leaders for new forms of journalism practice, including by incubating centers of research and practice and seeding formal and informal partnerships. Twenty-one percent of winners who responded to our survey noted that the Knight Foundation allowed people to incubate and test ideas. One explained, “KNC spawned a variety of innovative and experimental programs — many ahead of their time — cutting across [the technology and journalism] fields. Some really creative and exciting work resulted from the program. Specific results included the integration of social media and new technology platforms into journalism, and the promotion of community news as a critical form of journalism.” For example, the Tiziano Project — which developed an easy-to-use journalism platform to improve the information flow in communities by combining user-generated content with professional sources to produce visually compelling, interactive news sites — was named one of the world’s most innovative companies by Fast Company in

2014. Development Seed, a 2010 winning project, was an early provider of mapping tools aimed to create community knowledge. Partners such as NPR, USA Today, and the Chicago Tribune used its open-source tools for creating custom, embeddable hyper-local maps.

Another winner explained, “we had an idea... and [Knight had] the ability to spot a trend and say this is the beginning of something, this is the germ, and we want to be there and help influence it. Without Knight’s support, [our work on information architecture] probably would’ve just been an interesting idea that got some kind of foothold in academia with a couple of papers, and then where would it go? [With Knight funding], we were able to... build a center and hire people and go out in the world and run conferences and work with organizations [in different sectors] ... we were able to really build thought leadership in an area that hadn’t had it before.”

## **SUPPORTING NEW TOOLS AND STANDARDS FOR THE FIELD**

A wealth of technology-enabled tools and standards for collecting, managing, and accessing data is perhaps the most concrete contribution of the KNC and its winners to the field. These tools and standards — including open-source code and the promotion of an open-source ethic, as well as diverse datasets — contribute to a more accessible and citizen-centered practice of journalism.

Of all project goals, the largest proportion of projects — 44 percent — focused on increasing access to data. This is true across projects serving different types of users, including consumers (community members), newsrooms, nonprofits, governments, and universities. The KNC provided critical funding and support for these projects to reach their goals in increasing data access tools and applications — in civic engagement, urban planning, education, and many other sectors. For example, the Kiwanja Foundation’s project to develop a text messaging platform for journalists that improves the flow of news and information in communities through mobile devices, called FrontlineSMS, had been downloaded by more than six times the number of users than an earlier version of the product. It has been used to improve election turnout and transparency in Nigeria, to report on incidents of human trafficking in Haiti and Vietnam, and to assist domestic violence survivors in the United States.

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**“[The Knight News Challenge] has been a leader in helping to maintain ethics and standards of journalism as well as innovating and keeping pace with new technologies.” — KNC winner**

One winner surveyed explained, “the KNC has played a tremendous role supporting open-source technology projects and developing an ecosystem of tools that make it easier for both journalists and everyday citizens to record and share information. Many of the innovations we have worked on stem from the broader ecosystem of KNC winners.” Another winner described the wealth of tools made more accessible by the Challenge, explaining, “[the KNC] enabled users, researchers, and developers [to] have access to data collection tools and insights. [It] gave tools for students, hackathons, and startups [to] prototype or rapidly implement projects related to data and data inference.”

The News Challenge incubated many tools that are widely used within civic technology. One winner noted that “the project we won the KNC for is one of many civic technology projects that focused on access to data. KNC was largely responsible for seeding at least four civic technology companies that would not have existed otherwise (LocalData, Mapbox, Textizen, Civic Insight) and led to the proliferation of data used in media and urban planning.” Another winner described how Knight bolstered the open-source mapping field specifically, within the civic technology sector, by being an early-stage investor in projects like Mapbox and iD editor. Other organizations went on to serve diverse consumers based on these mapping technologies — from 2012 KNC-winning project Digital Democracy, which created rural community user-focused mapping applications, to major newsrooms including the New York Times and the Washington Post.

In addition to supporting data collection and management tools, the News Challenge also has helped create rich datasets on topics ranging from campaign donations (through 2015 KNC-winning project, Center for Responsive Politics) to the use of crisis counseling services (through 2013 KNC-winning project, Do Something, Inc.) to allegations of police misconduct (through 2015 KNC-winning project, Experimental Station). In many cases, the Knight Foundation funded datasets that may not otherwise have been supported by government, nonprofit, or for-profit players in the marketplace. An interviewee expanded on the role of Knight in funding the creating and dissemination of important datasets, citing that “Knight has been a very big player in this space, and without the funding, I think a lot of good ideas that are not directly business-related wouldn’t have been funded or datasets wouldn’t have been available.”

# CONCLUSION

When the Knight News Challenge began 10 years ago, its purpose was to fund innovative ideas that had the potential to change the industry. Although there was no set course in mind, a decade later, its portfolio of winners show that the Challenge has had focused, tangible impact.

In particular, the News Challenge took a chance on new ideas and innovators, helping to expand the intersection of technology, journalism and civic engagement. This injected new talent and leaders into fields that are facing significant technological disruption. It also shifted, in some cases, legacy media and civic organizations' orientation toward technology and innovation.

Not every project was a success. Among those that reported obstacles, access to technical expertise, the lack of strategic partnerships, and financial sustainability were chief among them.

Overall, the journalism and media industry continues to struggle with the core problem of how to sustainably provide access to quality, accurate information in a digital world. This challenge remains unsolved at scale.

Knight News Challenge winners have made significant contributions to the field, both during and after their participation in the Challenge. The contributions shared here are not exhaustive, but are compiled from what survey respondents and interviewees shared with the research team. These selections highlight the diversity of KNC projects and the gains they have made in their respective fields.

#### INCREASED DATA COLLECTION AND/OR ACCESS

- **Visualizing Funding for Libraries:** Introduced new technology for libraries to use to map grants, and encouraged libraries to think about mapping for their services in new ways.
- **Remote Access:** Through mapping, halted land invasions and illegal gold mining. Tracked hundreds of oil spills and other environmental threats in the Amazon and beyond.
- **Digital Democracy:** Supported indigenous and marginalized community residents in getting their lands declared environmental zones.
- **Census Reporter:** Increased access to census data for journalists, government officials, educators, and citizens in the United States, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, India, and Nepal.
- **WITNESS, Inc.:** Enhanced integration of citizen journalism and civic witnessing into mainstream journalism and human rights activism.
- **Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers:** Created an interactive data visualization tool to help the public, policymakers, researchers, and providers spot trends in health care.
- **Do Something, Inc.:** Developed Crisis Text Line, a national text messaging crisis counseling call line that reaches every area code in the United States and has exchanged nearly 50 million messages with people in crisis since 2013.

#### STRENGTHENED COMMUNITY OR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- **Vote-by-Smartphone:** Prototyped and tested a new approach for voters to get their absentee ballots, using established technology (electronics signatures) in a novel way (absentee ballot applications), to increase voter turnout.
- **Informed Voting from Start to Finish:** Developed the ability to quickly deliver information to voters that is tailored to specific races and ballot initiatives.
- **Next Generation of Exit Polls:** Disrupted the standard approach to exit polling, resulting in a new approach in 2018 midterm elections in which media will broadcast competing national vote counts and election day voter polls.

- **Video Volunteers:** Provided media training to communities in India to reduce corruption.
- **Invisible Institute:** Increased transparency about police misconduct in Chicago and created web-based tools to explore and analyze data about misconduct allegations, allowing those who have been involved in police encounters to access this information.

#### INFLUENCED SYSTEMS CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT

- **Procure.io:** Influenced the Obama Administration's approach to federal IT procurement reform after the launch of Healthcare.gov.
- **mRelief:** Increased citizens' access to information by developing a simple, easy-to-use platform now used in 42 U.S. states that allows individuals to find out if they qualify for public assistance.

#### IMPROVED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

- **Safecast:** Trained and equipped community members to monitor radiation, sparking a change in how this information can be monitored globally and influencing other organizations and national governments.
- **New York Public Library Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations:** Made journalism and the internet accessible to low-income families by providing Wi-Fi hot spots and digital literacy training.
- **The Tor Project:** Developed tools to protect journalists from government surveillance; trained in-person more than 2,500 librarians across seven countries and 23 U.S. states about privacy.
- **WeFarm:** Built an engaged community of more than 1,000 farmers Kenya, Uganda, and Peru who can use their smartphones to crowdsource agricultural information from peers.

#### STRENGTHENED JOURNALISM KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

- **MIT Center for Civic Media:** Popularized civic media, which uses media and technology to enhance civic participation and foster digital inclusion, advancing the field and inspiring others to open centers focused on this.
- **Online Computer Library Center, Inc.:** Developed a national training program to train librarians to become Wikipedia editors and teach their local communities how to contribute.

Arabella designed an evaluation plan to assess the impact of the Knight News Challenge, map the progress and trajectory of the KNC winners, and identify the critical supports that have led to project or individual success over the last decade. This process included reviewing grant documents, developing and conducting a survey to gather data on winner outcomes and the factors that contribute to outcomes, completing research on projects and winners, and interviewing winners and field leaders to contextualize our findings. Below is a description of the methods we used to gather data for this evaluation.

### **DOCUMENT REVIEW**

The Arabella team reviewed documents for 139 KNC-winning projects including grant proposals, grant reports, and other documents provided by winners and the foundation. The quantity and quality of grant documents varied between winners due to differences in the Knight Foundation's reporting requirements over time. For each grantee, documents may have included:

- Grant proposal
- Grant proposal budget
- Grant agreement
- Pre-board materials
- Post-board materials
- Interim report(s)
- Interim budget report(s)
- Final report(s)
- Final budget report(s)
- Internal foundation assessments

We abstracted information from grantee documents about project outcomes, assets, and hurdles. We developed a guide that reviewers used to assess and code findings. Early in the process, we established sufficient reliability among our team by creating code criteria and performing coder reliability tests. We checked the validity of our data by sharing an early excerpt of the data set, along with our coding document, with the Knight News Challenge team to solicit and incorporate their feedback about whether the data we were collecting captured what they were seeking.

**SURVEY**

Arabella designed and conducted an online survey to gather information about winner experiences, outcomes and the factors that contribute to those outcomes. The survey was sent to primary contacts included in a list provided by the Knight Foundation. Of the 139 primary contacts listed, five emails were returned by the server and three primary contacts were listed on multiple grants. For primary contacts listed on multiple grants, contacts were asked to fill out the survey once and note progress on their most recent grant. This left 131 potential respondents. To encourage high response rates, we sent potential survey respondents between one and six email reminders, including two from the Knight Foundation.

Of the 131 potential respondents, 75 (57 percent) successfully completed the survey. We aggregated the survey data with data collected via document review to further explore factors that may have influenced the trajectories and outcomes of projects and winners.

**INTERVIEWS**

Arabella conducted 21 interviews with Knight Foundation staff members (4), KNC winners (10), and field leaders (7) to deepen our understanding of the initiative's successes and challenges. Arabella worked with the foundation to determine a list of interviewees that represented a broad range of stakeholders, including both successful and unsuccessful winners, winners who have maintained contact with the foundation post-grant and those who have not, and leaders from across the technology, journalism, and civic engagement fields. Our interviewees represented a variety of experiences across the following categories.



## ENDNOTES

1. Knight News Challenge grants were awarded to projects, which could be proposed by individuals, organizations, or other entities. In this report, the term “winner” references the individuals, whether independent or a part of an entity, whose projects were supported by the Challenge. The term “winning projects” refers to the actual project or organization that was supported by the Challenge.
2. See Appendix B for details about our methodology.
3. We assessed potential relationships between a project’s primary goal and its cohort type or target user, but had no significant findings.
4. Four of the 20 projects evolved. Two were acquired, a third fed into a new project, and there was no data for the fourth project. significant findings.
5. This includes survey responses from active projects with closed grants (43), projects that are currently funded by the Challenge (9), and an additional three responses from winning projects that had multiple winner contacts.
6. Knight Foundation had previously awarded a Prototype grant to mRelief, so this growth was at least in part attributable to Knight’s earlier investment.
7. This does not include nine additional respondents who have current grants.
8. Relatedly, 55 percent said it helped them to garner press attention.
9. Unfortunately, we do not have open-ended information about what more winners would need from Knight to develop fundraising, business, and technical expertise.