

# Bridging the Digital Divide to improve life in Central Wisconsin

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## Information shifting to digital, delivered electronically

**W**herever you are and however you've received this text, if you were reading it 10 years ago, it almost certainly would have been on paper, in the form of a printed document.

On the other hand, anyone reading this a few years from now will most likely read it on a screen, delivered via the Internet on some sort of electronic device. That device might be an e-book reader such as Amazon Kindle, an Apple iPad, a mobile phone, a laptop or a digital television set.

Or, it could be a completely new device that doesn't even exist today except in someone's imagination!

Paper will still have uses, but its role as a means of delivering information to masses of people will be greatly diminished compared to today. Similar changes in the method of delivery will occur with other forms of news, whether it's newspapers and magazines, television, telephone, or even the mail.

The shift in how information flows – from print to digital, from mass media to personalized media with content tailored to each individual recipient – is already well-advanced today, and the pace of sweeping change is picking up. Within a few short years, the way we communicate will have been completely transformed in less than a generation. Many of our youngest residents already communicate through electronic means.

The impact of that change on our central Wisconsin community may be subtle, but it will be quite dramatic over time. Likewise, the impact on individuals within the community will be great.

**This paper is intended to demonstrate the importance of establishing easy and affordable access to the Internet and digital communications for every member of our community.**

It outlines some of the benefits that will come from providing everyone in south Wood County with the ability to send, receive, and make use of digital information via the Internet and electronic devices. Information will come as easily as it has in the past by traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio and books.

The information revolution is evident today. Recent surveys of area residents by Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County revealed that newspapers are the top means by which people obtain local information. As in most small communities across the country, newspapers are one of the area's primary information sources regarding local government and economy; jobs and business opportunities; and community events.

**And that's where much of the problem lies, because that important source of information is shrinking.**

In Wisconsin, three publicly traded corporations, Journal Communications Inc., Lee Enterprises Inc., and Gannett Co. own the three largest newspapers in the state as well as many smaller dailies and community newspapers across Wisconsin. The impact of the digital revolution on their operations illustrates what's going on throughout the industry. All three have reported falling newspaper circulation and double-digit declines in advertising revenues in 2009.

Classified ad revenues have been hit particularly hard, falling nearly 50 percent from 2008 to 2009, according to the companies recent financial reports filed with the

## Digital Divide Perpetuates INEQUALITIES

The term “**digital divide**” refers to the gap between people who have good access to new information technology and those who, for various reasons, are lagging behind. The divide encompasses differences in personal financial resources, digital infrastructure, access to hardware, and people’s knowledge and skills.

The digital divide can be measured in numerous ways. Some common measurements include the percentage of people within one or more communities that own computers, have access to the Internet, or access the Internet through wireless connections. Other gauges include mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people, the percentage of students who have access to computer technology in schools and libraries, and the percentage of young people who use social networking sites.

A study by the **Pew Foundation’s Internet and American Life Project** in 2009 provides a good example of the divide. It found that 85 percent of households with annual incomes of more than \$75,000 have Internet service, while only 42 percent of households making less than \$30,000 had such service.

That’s a societal problem because people on the wrong side of the digital divide are often the same people who lack the money or education to take full advantage of opportunities within their communities. The digital revolution offers them a way to potentially close the opportunity gap, but they’re at a disadvantage because they don’t have easy access to digital technology that would enable them to do so.

So the digital divide threatens to perpetuate the inequalities that information technology can be used to resolve. That holds back the entire community. 

U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Like other U.S.-based newspaper companies, they have responded by cutting costs, including the number of journalists employed and the size of the papers published. They have also responded by expanding their online activities, beefing up their own Web sites that deliver news and ads.

### *Internet usage growing as newspaper circulation shrinks*

Those trends mirror what’s happening all over the country as the newspaper publishing industry retrenches and tries to find ways to remain financially viable in the age of the Internet. The industry’s decline is not merely a consequence of the recent economic downturn, although that has obviously played a part.

Newspaper revenues began falling long before the economy soured, mainly because better ways of delivering certain services became available. Internet usage increased from 44 percent of the U.S. population in 2000 to 74 percent by 2009, according to Nielsen Online. It’s no longer really an option for most people; it’s a necessity for anyone who wants to stay fully informed and connected to their community.

Classified advertising has historically been the lifeblood of newspapers. But the Internet has provided much better platforms for help wanted, real estate and car listings. Rather than poring over pages of small-type listings for the right car at the right price, people can now actively search vast numbers of listings instantly via the Internet. They can specify exactly what they’re looking for, in a price range they can afford, and the service is free. Newspapers simply cannot match the new technology without going digital themselves.

Similarly, job seekers can scour thousands of openings from all over the country, and put their resumes in front of hundreds of prospective employers, using Internet-based employment services such as Monster and CareerBuilder.com.

According to recent data compiled by the Newspaper Association of America, newspaper revenue created by job ads in 2000 to 2009 fell by 90 percent; that’s a decline of \$8.7 billion to less than \$1 billion. At the same time, online job postings grew to more than 4 million positions. Almost every newspaper now publishes its job ads online and in print.

To be sure, printed help wanted ads still have a place in the local marketplace, but newspapers are losing much of that lucrative revenue because in many ways they’ve been overtaken by a superior technology that’s revolutionizing how we send, receive and use information.

We must make sure everyone has access to superior technology so we can all share in its advantages, individually and as a community.

### *How will changes impact journalism, government?*

**The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy** concluded in its landmark 2009 report: “There is plainly reason to be anxious about the consequences (of shrinking newspapers) for local journalism, and therefore for local democratic governance.”

Newspapers will continue to play vital roles in providing communities with information. In the last year, south Wood County saw the creation of a weekly local newspaper. From June 2009 to February 2010 its subscriber base grew to 2,500 people. So there is clearly still a viable market for community print newspapers.

But the roles of actual paper newspapers will be less dominant than they have been in the past. Even if the industry stabilizes and newspapers start growing again, there will continue to be a rapid expansion of digital information. Indeed, that is precisely why organizations are focusing their resources on future growth – on Web sites, social networking, mobile phones and on other new media.

The growth of digital information will be good for our community, providing many benefits not possible prior to the digital revolution. If we handle the transition right and work to make digital technology accessible to everyone, we can make the most of the many opportunities it affords us to improve local government, boost central Wisconsin's economy, and enhance our day-to-day lives.

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

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

The Knight Commission was formed by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Aspen Institute in April 2008. Its 2009 report highlighted the information needs of America's communities.

**It concluded that the nation and local communities should pursue three broad goals in order to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital information age:**

- **Maximize** the availability of relevant and credible information to all people. This includes support for organizations that help put the information into useful and usable forms.

- **Strengthen** the ability of individuals to use and create information about their communities.
- **Promote** individual engagement with information and the public life of the community.

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

The strategy will become evident as developments proceed. But for starters, they include:

- **Giving** people access to information without regard to income or social status.
- **Making** sure there is affordable Internet service in multiple locations so that people can get to it when and where they need or want it.
- **Teaching** people how to use and access digital information in schools, public libraries and other community centers.

## ***Digital information benefits communities and individuals***

Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County received grants from Knight Foundation to develop a **Community Information Action Agenda** – to help increase public awareness of the need for better access to digital information and to identify ways of doing so locally.

It is part of Knight's Community Information Challenge, a five-year initiative with community foundations across the country to help find innovative ways to keep residents informed and engaged with the aid of digital technologies.

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## **Knight Foundation Grants Already At Work**

Bridging the digital divide is something that communities across the country are working on; they offer local individuals, businesses, organizations and governments a wealth of concepts and results to generate effective, cost-efficient ways to improve access to information in order to improve peoples' lives.

**Here are just a few examples of projects undertaken elsewhere that have been funded by Knight Foundation's Community Information Challenge:**

- **In Michigan,** Grand Rapids Community Foundation created a citizen-powered news site called The Rapidian, where residents prepare community news reports for local TV and radio. Armed with tools, training, publishing platforms and other support from a community media center, residents are given the chance to report neighborhood by neighborhood. [therapidian.org](http://therapidian.org)
- **In San Antonio, Texas,** community organizations have developed a virtual neighborhood "public square" called NOWCastSA. It provides hands-on training for citizen journalists in the use of online broadcast technology and social networking. More than 25 public and private organizations work together to create opportunities for community connection. A pilot online studio is located at one public library, providing video coverage of community events. [nowcastsa.wordpress.com](http://nowcastsa.wordpress.com)
- **Latino youth in Los Angeles County** will learn about the importance of participating in the 2010 Census via cell phones and other technologies. This will assist Los Angeles County which has more than 4.4 million people in areas considered hard to count, and uses Census counts to allocate funds for critical public services, including health, education, job training, and transportation. 

Trabian Shorters, the Knight Foundation's vice president for communities who's leading the Community Information Challenge, said the goal is to ensure that everyone has the information necessary to lead informed lives.

The many benefits of Internet-based communications, both social and individual, are widespread and growing. They include thousands of consumer-oriented services – buying and selling cars; swapping furniture and household items; comparing prices among retailers; researching products and features; printing coupons; paying bills; training for new and better jobs; e-mail; online maps and directions. The variety of services is growing and endless.

Internet access is no longer an option for businesses and professionals. According to the Community Foundation's recent surveys of area residents, more than half of respondents said they used a computer at work.

And it's no longer a convenience – Internet access is quickly becoming a necessity of modern life as a result of the changing media and technology landscape being adopted by individuals and organizations locally, nationally and around the world.



**Knight Commission's full report can be downloaded from:**



## Bridging the Digital Divide Locally

The Community Foundation recently surveyed 728 south Wood County residents. Research compared three different groups: general population, low-income families (from 'Stuff the Desk' event), and Internet-users.

Of those surveyed in the general population, 22 percent cited no computer at home, yet there were significant differences among age groups.

However, when compared to people at local 'Stuff the Desk' events which provide school supplies for students from low-income families, nearly 30 percent of the respondents indicated they did not have a computer at home. That figure jumped in the same group to 55 percent for people 18-to-24 years old.

Altogether, 37 percent of low-income families said they were not connected to the Internet.

More than four out of five low-income families said the reason they didn't have a computer was the cost. Only about 18 percent cited "no need" as the reason. That was in sharp contrast with people surveyed from the general population, among whom "no need" was cited by 57 percent as the reason they did not have a computer. People in low-income families want online access, but many just can't afford it.

Although some individuals might legitimately have no "need" for a computer in their homes, virtually everyone benefits, directly or indirectly, from better access to technology, even if it's through the library or other public facilities. By increasing access through community facilities, we can help ensure that no one is denied access because of cost.

There are a number of steps we can take to make access to computers and digital information more widespread. Even with no organized program in place, we have been making progress locally, albeit in small increments:

- When volunteers, school staff and local businesses work together, change can happen. Last year, a total of 60 people in 14 local families received free refurbished computers when Grove Elementary upgraded its computer

lab. More than half of the school's students are from low-income families.

- At the start of this year, Charles & JoAnn Lester Library of Nekoosa and Mid-State Technical College teamed up to provide free beginning computer and Internet classes to residents. This again shows that the digital gap can be addressed.

### **Knight Commission recommendations that might be implemented in south Wood County:**

- Support public service media aimed at meeting community information needs.
- Increase the role of education, community and non-profit organizations as hubs of journalism and information-sharing activities.
- Facilitate easy and low-cost access to public records.
- Make digital literacy part of the education program of schools at all levels.
- Support public libraries and other community institutions as centers of digital and media training.
- Encourage all citizens to actively participate in community governance by conducting "community summits" to address issues and identify common goals.
- Encourage good information flow in the design of public spaces.
- Establish at least one high-quality online hub where institutions and members of the public can share information and ideas about the community.

The opportunities of the digital information revolution for our community and for us as individuals are clear, and the potential benefits are growing every day. To realize those benefits to our maximum potential, a community commitment is needed to universal and affordable access for everybody in the south Wood County area.

**For local updates and information on the Knight Community Information Challenge:**  
**www.cfswc.org**  
**715-423-3863**