

# Statehouse Reporting: January 2015 Report

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*INN study shows a significant number of journalism, data projects and engagement projects at Statehouses around the country are under way, but funding and headcount remain an issue.*

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Observers generally agree that statehouse reporting—a form of journalism vital to maintaining an informed citizenry—has been on the decline, but efforts to keep it going are far from dead and are in dire need of additional financial support.

The presence of journalists in statehouses was the subject of an Investigative News Network summit\* of funders, practitioners, technology companies and media, held in Chicago on October 2014. The meeting was based on a 2014 Pew Research Report titled “[America’s Shifting Statehouse Press](#),” which found that fewer than a third of newspapers assign any kind of reporter to the statehouse.

“The recent decline in the number of journalists covering state and local governments has made it more difficult to obtain factual, objective information about our public institutions. The Laura and John Arnold Foundation is working to address this problem as part of our broader effort to improve government transparency,” said Kelli Rhee, Vice President of Venture Development at the Arnold Foundation.

“We believe the recent meeting with journalists and innovative thinkers sparked new ideas and productive conversations. Our hope is that those discussions will lead to scalable solutions focused on making government more open and accountable.”

The summit proved illuminating for a few attendees, especially for those who lacked knowledge of the severity of the issue. At least one had no knowledge that journalists did not have access to the same tools lobbyists use every day, for example. Another attendee expressed regret that more news practitioners were not present during the meeting.

Now INN has completed this follow-up report to the summit. Its findings: Attendees overwhelmingly agree that that statehouse reporting is vital to maintaining an informed citizenry, as well as keeping government accountable and transparent. And, more importantly, various organizations—both in technology and nonprofit journalism—have produced projects that make some inroads to filling the gap.

The projects vary from one industry to another, and they are divided in two camps: the open data proponents (the technologists) and the news practitioners who want more reporters on the ground (the journalists).

Among the technologists is [POPVOX](#), an online startup that “meshes real-time legislative data with users’ personal stories and sentiment, delivering public input to government in a format tailored to actionable policy decisions.”

POPVOX is working on a next-generation project that makes its database of legislative activity available to developers who can then turn it into actionable data, said CEO Marci Harris.

“Our next step is to begin to do that at the state level,” Harris said. “Really, the only thing that determines how quickly we do that or how big we go—whether it’s one state at a time or a larger project, a 10-state pilot moving out to the 50—is that we’re resource-constrained.”

The data software needed is often too expensive for journalists or the public to access, she said. “Neutral information is expensive,” she added.

And POPVOX is not alone; there are also other projects moving forward such as [askthem.io](#) and [Councilmatic](#) that work similarly in concept but more so at the local level. Such projects exhibit promise and indicate that there is an emerging market in civic engagement, and organizations are racing to be the first to strike gold.

Another data project with similar goals is Digital Democracy, “a new online platform featuring a searchable database of state legislative committees hearings, allowing the user to search videos by keyword, topic, speaker or date.”

Leading the [Digital Democracy](#) project is former California Senator and Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee and Christine Robertson, Associate Director for the Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy at the university of Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California. Robertson was at the October meeting on behalf of the institute.

“Our goal is how do we create the data end-point that gives journalists access to that information inside the statehouse—campaign finance, lobbyists data—our goal is to equip the journalist, not be the journalist,” Robertson said.

Though no specific launch date has been announced, Robertson said they hope to launch a California pilot in the spring. This pilot would make available all of the committee hearings from 2015 at the state legislature, she said.

Making legislative data more readily available to the hands of the public is the end-goal for Robertson’s project, echoing similar sentiments from POPVOX who believes well-funded private-interest groups have an upper hand in the game.

“If there is no proper investment in discovery tools to access and discover information, all the products that do this will continue to be in the hands of well-funded individuals and organizations like lobbyists,” Robertson said. “I think what we’re going to see if there’s not funding for these types of programs, even to get them off the ground, I think the public will continue to be more disengaged in their statehouse and government at large.”

INN member nonprofit news organizations like the Center for Responsive Politics, , VTDigger, the Texas Tribune and the [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning Center for Public Integrity also are taking to the task of keeping statehouse reporting alive.

The latter, for example, announced in September an initiative to hire 50 freelancers nationwide to cover corruption in state government. And in late January, the CPI produced a [major report](#) on state-level elections and money in politics.

The report essentially identifies individuals, unions and trade groups who gave the most money to politicians in each of the states for the 2014 elections. The CPI has produced a slew of stories focused on these findings as well.

Veteran journalist John Dunbar, deputy executive editor and managing editor covering politics and finance at the CPI, says the nonprofit is also working closely with the Associated Press, which has launched an initiative to more aggressively cover legislation in each state.

In December, the AP began [“doubling down”](#) on state government coverage by hiring more statehouse reporters. In its announcement, the AP said it has hired 13 statehouse reporters over the past year and that an additional 40 contract reporters will be added this year. Further details of the hires or its collaboration with the Center remain to be seen, and both efforts will be followed up upon as new information emerges.

Meanwhile, the Texas Tribune launched a product in January to shed more light on state legislature activity. Under its current name, the [84th Lege](#) is a special page on the site that allows people to follow the actions of Texas lawmakers such as the bills they introduce and the ones they vote for.

The Texas Tribune collaborated with the nonprofit Sunlight Foundation to use its [Open States](#) app. The app feeds data about legislators to the 84th Lege site to compliment other reporting done by Tribune reporters. And it’s collaborations like these that are valuable and could present a viable solution to fill the gap in statehouse reporting, says managing editor Ayan Mitra.

“Thanks to the Sunlight Foundation’s Open States product, we were able to keep our legislative-bill search updated without having to do manual coding on our own. This is the type of common coding that more folks across the state need,” Mitra said. “Because of Open States, we were able to focus on other features for the page that will be a great service to our audience.”

[VTDigger](#) founder and editor Anne Galloway<sup>1</sup> is an advocate for hiring more reporters. She said the VTDigger is probably the news organization with the strongest presence in the Vermont statehouse with five reporters on the beat.

She praises the work of the CPI and the [Sunlight Foundation](#), but says statehouse reporting is more than that.

“Projects like those are a tiny, tiny part of it,” she said. “It’s important but I think people want to know what the impacts of changing state statutes and what’s going on inside state government. It’s more than just who is influencing what.”

Galloway believes putting more reporters on the statehouse beat is the solution, and she expressed skepticism on whether there are any real solutions came out of the October meeting. Galloway wants to see whether the AP or the CPI will fulfill their goals of hiring more reporters.

“If no hiring is done, let’s reconvene and see what’s happening,” she said. “We need to hire reporters.”

What is clear is that projects at nonprofit organizations—whether academic, journalistic or technology-based—are in dire need of financial support to fill the gap in statehouse reporting. Just who is going to fund it or how it will be funded is unclear. There are mixed views on whether there is even philanthropic interest to fund such projects.

Galloway, for example, said “it was totally discouraging.” She said she left the October meeting with a sense that there is zero philanthropic funding for statehouse reporting. But she put the onus on practitioners and those who attended the meeting.

“I think they want us to tell them what we want and come up with a plan, and they didn’t get that,” she said. “There weren’t enough practitioners there—I don’t think we had enough critical mass to say ‘hey look, this is what people on the ground need.’ Technology is important, but it’s a tool and you still need people—you need people digging. Technology is a starting place, not an end goal.”

Dunbar, at the Center for Public Integrity, agrees that funding has gravely wounded watchdog journalism in each state Capitol.

“The reality is that cash-strapped news organizations, with some notable exceptions, have abandoned the statehouses of the nation,” Dunbar said, adding: “Some philanthropic organizations, like the Arnold Foundation, are helping to fill the gap. Foundations are essential

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: Anne Galloway is also a member of the board of directors for INN. All feedback and comments provided by Anne are done so from her own perspective and do not necessarily represent the position of INN itself.

in helping create a robust new model of state government coverage, supported by multiple funding streams, now and in the foreseeable future.”

So, what is the solution? What journalistic infrastructure can help fill the gap in statehouse reporting? Who will execute it, and who will fund it?

At the meeting, the groups identified a number of possible solutions, two that seemed attractive and viable: a pilot state model (conceptually called “SWARM”) that involves putting a “surge” of resources to statehouse coverage in a bellwether state or region; and an open state database that facilitates access to information of all legislative activity across states.

Which of the two models makes more sense depends on who you ask. For example, journalism forward-thinkers like David Cohn, executive producer at AJ+, said he favors concepts like SWARM because it is narrow, it has focus and has the potential for impact.

“I like the idea that there was kind of constraints in terms of time and focus for a period of time,” Cohn said. “I think I like the potential timeline that it has a sunset period, kind of like a Kickstarter campaign. There’s a gaming element to it: once people have a sense of time limit, people will fight for it and it also gives a sense of completion when it’s all done. It’s goal oriented as opposed to more nebulous.”

But ask Harris at POPVOX or Mittra at the Texas Tribune which of the two models they favor, and these are the answers you get:

“The one that I worked on at the meeting and is very in-line with the work that we do at POPVOX is the legislative database, and again, that’s something we were working on before the meeting and continue to work on,” Harris said.

“Definitely the open state resource discussion,” Mittra said. “This will really help news orgs across the country get important information without devoting staff and time that most orgs don’t have. This can also help spot national trends and storylines that would be harder to see otherwise.”

Better technology? More reporters? The ideas vary, but with very little consensus. Perhaps more scarce than funding is a concrete plan that foundations could support.

In a [blog post](#), Kelly Born of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation wrote that the INN meeting served as an opportunity to identify barriers in statehouse reporting. But, she said, “while the discussion of problems facing statehouse journalism was rich and the ideas generated interesting, none are silver bullets. Addressing the issues plaguing statehouse reporting will require time and effort from many actors across the news media. The question remains which, if any, of these ideas could be implemented, iterated, and scaled—and which might make a demonstrable difference.”

When asked what model has a higher potential to succeed, Born said she favored the idea of a “surge” model that would focus resources to one state or region.

“SWARM resonates a little more with me because it feels it’s more concrete; it’s the lower hanging fruit,” she said. “It’s something you could try at a couple of places and see what works, wind it up or wind it down based on that.”

And later when asked about foundation support for this type of work, she said statehouse reporting is not a priority for her foundation, Hewlett.

“We are not planning funding in this area,” she said. “Our goal with all of our work, is around improving conditions for dialogue and negotiation in Congress. We are not funding anything that doesn’t directly affect that.”

Barbara Raab, a program officer for the Ford Foundation’s media and justice initiative, declined to be interviewed for this report, only saying that the Ford Foundation feels it is very important for there to be high-quality reporting on what state governments are doing.

“The range of views on problems and solutions shared in the meeting was very useful and though there is a temptation to think the solution is either more reporters or more technology the reality is that it will be both. The challenge will be knitting them together,” said Tom Glaisyer, Program Director for the Informed Participation Initiative at the Democracy Fund.

“In a news environment that will likely continue to have a large number of relatively small outlets all with small shares of a state’s audience the challenge is knitting together the sometimes idiosyncratic strengths of particular organizations to serve the specific environments and local communities.”

The Hewlett and Ford foundations are hardly representative of the entire philanthropic community, but those interviewed for this report overwhelmingly said their support counts.

Failure to invest in statehouse reporting projects would be a missed opportunity, Mitra said. A lot of important stories can be missed, and lack of funding prevents news organizations from engaging in a broader conversation and share best practices, he added.

Didi Kuo, a research associate at Stanford University, recently launched a research initiative within Stanford’s Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. As a researcher, Kuo says she has kept up with the academic and scholarly work on state-level accountability and decline of statehouse reporting.

“There is a dire need for investment into state-level reporting,” Kuo said. “We need to know if there is more or less corruption in state politics as elections become more expensive, and as

print media declines. We need more than just the opinions of bloggers and non-experts who seek to distort facts. In other words, it is critical to establish a baseline of facts so that there can be substantive dialogue about policies at the state level.”

As evident in this report, the discussion on the issue continues. And INN hopes this will be the first in a series of public reports conducted and published by INN and others on the state of statehouse reporting.

“The need for increased civic engagement facilitated by insightful and persistent unbiased news and information is clear,” says Kevin Davis, CEO & Executive Director of INN. “We see nonprofit newsrooms as being a key part of the solution moving forward tackling this need, by increasing engagement and participation of the people in the communities, counties and states served.”

“We are very grateful to the Arnold Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the McCormick Foundation, the Knight Foundation and all of the other funders, technologists, disruptors and news practitioners who attended the event and contributed to this report,” Davis added.

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**About INN:** INN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Its mission is to help nonprofit news organizations produce and distribute stories with impact; to achieve cost efficiencies by pooling resources and services; and to develop new revenue streams that will help member organizations become sustainable, mission-driven, nonprofit businesses.

## **Statehouse Reporting summit, October 2014**

**Steve Waldman**, author of “Information Needs of Communities” for the FCC (moderator)

**Kevin Davis**, CEO & Executive Director of INN (host)

**John Bracken**, Knight Foundation (funder)

**Clark Bell**, McCormick Foundation (funder)

**Kelly Born**, Hewlett Foundation (funder)

**Tom Glaisyer**, Democracy Fund (funder)

**Barbara Raab**, Ford Foundation (funder)

**Kelli Rhee**, Laura & John Arnold Foundation (funder)

**Brant Houston**, Board Chairman of INN (nonprofit & public media)

**Anne Galloway**, Executive Director and Editor of VTDigger (nonprofit & public media)

**Ayan Mitra**, Managing Editor of Texas Tribune (nonprofit & public media)

**Mary Frances O’Connor**, Director of Development & External Relations of Better Government Association (nonprofit & public media)

**Chuck Lewis**, Executive Editor of Investigative Reporting Workshop (nonprofit & public media)

**John Dunbar**, Deputy Executive Editor of the Center for Public Integrity (nonprofit & public media)

**Marci Harris**, CEO of POPVOX, (nonprofit & public media)

**Amy Mitchell**, Director of Journalism Research at the Pew Research Center (expert)

**Didi Kuo**, Research Associate at Stanford University (academic)

**Christine Robertson**, Associate Director for the Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy at the university of Cal Poly (academic)

**Tom Berman**, Editor at the Associated Press (practitioner)

**Vivian Schiller**, former Head of News at Twitter (SME)

**Ray Long**, Statehouse Reporter for the Chicago Tribune (practitioner)

**Brendan Ballou**, graduate student at Stanford University (technologist)

**Burt Herman**, Vice President of Editorial at Livefyre (technologist)

**Dave Cohn**, Executive Producer at AJ+ (technologist)