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Dear SPJ leaders,

This memo outlines some thoughts and suggestions toward the strategic planning process of SPJ, based on a report currently under final editing/design for the Knight Foundation, titled “Mapping the Civic Data Universe: Ten Ways to Improve Access to Government Information through Expanded Interstellar Connections.” The report should be out this summer, and Knight gave me permission to share preliminary findings. I presented a summary at the National Freedom of Information Coalition summit in April.

In the study, I examined the websites and IRS 990 forms of about 200 organizations in the United States that have some interest in freedom of information, broken into roughly a dozen galaxies, including journalism, civil society, law clinics, state coalitions, libraries, government, technology, etc. I also interviewed about 50 executive directors. I attempted to identify areas of duplication, gaps, elements of successful groups, and opportunities for collaboration. Here are some of the observations that might be relevant to SPJ:

- **SPJ’s image:** It is probably no surprise to anyone in SPJ leadership that the group’s reputation is complicated. People outside of SPJ respect the organization and its history, but it is clearly not a part of the “in” crowd today, including with many funders. It is still perceived by many as an outdated organization of old print white males. Kind of like that wise old grandfather that you revere and respect, but not cutting edge or someone you would like to lead the family business into the future. Indeed, membership continues to decline (SPJ is now, for the first time, no longer the largest journalism organization in the U.S. – it was surpassed this year by IRE). The tumult during the past year, primarily driven by the actions of the most recent executive director, didn’t help its reputation. It will take significant change, not just tweaking, to reverse that thinking.
- **Shifting galaxies:** The journalism galaxy, as we know, is having a tough time. A few groups are attracting the bulk of the foundation funding (ProPublica, CPJ, RCFP, etc.). Nonprofit civil society groups are filling gaps left by journalism, such as litigation and advocacy. Many of these groups could be good partners, particularly in finding additional grants. Key groups that are worth developing partnerships with now (hot with funders) include RCFP, CPJ, INN, and those in the tech sector. Funders are all about collaboration. SPJ was working toward that through some excellent trust-building

through association management. The past year set SPJ back on that front, but nothing that can't be repaired.

- **Organizational structure:** Groups that appear most successful have full-time fundraisers and communication staffers (good for SPJ). Strong executive directors are paramount, and many of the best ones do not come from the topic area, such as journalism. Large boards appear to be an impediment to change and can quickly ruin organizations, or at least hold them back. Membership organizations are struggling nationally. Some groups are shifting to supporters rather than members because members expect energy to be focused on them and supporters expect it to be focused on the cause. The most impactful organizations are located in power centers, such as Washington, D.C., and New York.
- **Crowded lanes:** Areas where many groups are competing include training, federal advocacy, and federal litigation. Also, guides and online resources are pretty well saturated. While I focused on FOI, in looking at the breadth of groups, I noticed that others have crowded out SPJ in the ethics lane, as well. Well, just about every lane. SPJ is a great generalist organization, but is not seen as the leading group in any one area. That doesn't mean SPJ shouldn't work in those lanes, but know that other groups dominate in exposure and grant funding. It would be a significant fight to elbow back into those lanes.
- **Gaps:** Work at the state/local level is a significant gap today. Public education also is lacking – few are taking up the banner of improving the image of journalists. This, clearly, is important today and has the potential of attracting funding toward bolstering the credibility of journalism as an institution. Note that Reporters Committee and CPJ have started moving into this lane some, and they could very well own it in the next few years if they wish to.

Based on the preceding observations, I would recommend SPJ consider the following:

1. **Rebrand** as an advocacy organization promoting professional journalism – own that lane before someone else does. Make it THE group people think about when they think about “good” journalism. That includes pushing the code of ethics, calling out bad actors (including our own), and explaining to the public the difference between bad and good journalism. It includes a national PR campaign (Got Journalism?) and full-on advocacy, even lobbying (SPJ is a 501c6 so it can advocate all it likes). Don't certify or license journalists, but be the champion for good journalism. That is actually the reason SDX was formed – those frat guys in Indiana thought a group needed to be started to promote good, professional journalism, as opposed to the yellow journalism that permeated the country in the late 1890s. It's true to our roots and fills a need. Also could be popular with philanthropists and celebrity endorsements (Meryl Streep, with one shout-out, spurred millions of dollars in donations and grants to CPJ).
2. **Shift efforts to the cause, not members.** People can continue to be members, and large chapters can continue to exist, if they wish, but the future is not in chapters or membership. I know this is unpopular and that people will recoil at the thought. If

resources continue to be put into membership and chapters, then this organization will eventually die, resulting in a foundation, relatively weak compared to other foundations, that provides grants to other groups. Let chapter activities die, shift membership to “supporters” and build on other strengths to make up for the revenue loss (e.g., the association management business started several years ago). It might be good to review the memo Joe Skeel wrote with such a vision in 2014 (attached, starting on page 49).

3. **Sell the Indianapolis facility** and set up shop in Washington, D.C., where it can enjoy greater exposure to other groups and funders, and exert greater influence on helping journalism.
4. **Get more techy.** Knight and other funders are still hot on forward-thinking, tech-oriented groups. More energy should be put into tech partnerships and tools, perhaps even with additional tech employees. Partnerships with Google and Facebook are good (for the most part), but need to expand with other groups.
5. **Collaboration** is a must for the next executive director. It should be someone who gets to know all the players – other groups and funders. It should be someone with high EQ, who can build trust, who has an abundance mentality. The role of the president should be diminished; the executive director should be the face of the organization, particularly if working out of D.C.

Let me be clear, it does not make me happy writing this stuff. I, like most SPJ members, joined up in college and became loyal to the cause. That is why I want SPJ to survive and thrive. I look at it like the March of Dimes, an organization founded in 1938 to fight polio. Well, after the polio vaccine was discovered in 1955, it no longer had a cause. The organization had to decide, fold up shop or change? They changed the mission to focus on birth defects, and they are still strong today. SPJ must adjust to the times. It is no longer 1909, nor even the 1970s, when it had a strong purpose, mission and following. It’s not easy for people, in this case the board and the members at large, to completely change an organization. Look at all the organizations that did not adjust in the face of external change, and therefore died. I hope that will not be SPJ!

More details will be available in the final report when that is released this summer or fall. If you have questions, I’m happy to chat.

Sincerely,

David Cuillier