Developing the Emerging “Fifth Estate” of Participatory News, Media, and Civic Change

The Center for Civic Media supports research at MIT to innovate civic media tools and practices and test them in communities. Bridging two established programs at MIT—one known for inventing alternate technical futures, the other for identifying the cultural and social potential of media change—the Center for Civic Media is a joint effort between the MIT Media Lab and the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program, made possible by a funding from the Knight Foundation.

The Center works to create technical and social systems for sharing, prioritizing, organizing, and acting on information. These include developing new technologies to support and foster civic media and political action; serving as an international resource for the study and analysis of civic media; and coordinating community-based test beds both in the United States and internationally.

These three activities are vitally interconnected. We study the existing uses of civic media to identify best practices and urgent needs; connect those insights to the development of new tools and processes; partner with local groups to put these tools and processes into the hands of community builders; and monitor the results to inform the next phase of development.

We use the term civic media, rather than citizen journalism: civic media is any form of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents. Civic media goes beyond news gathering and reporting. The Center amplifies the development of technologies for community empowerment, while also serving to generate curricula and open-source frameworks for civic action.

Transforming civic knowledge into civic action is essential to democracy. As with journalism, the most delicate and important information can often focus on leaders and institutions that abuse the trust of the communities they serve. By helping provide people with necessary skills to process, evaluate, and act upon knowledge in circulation, civic media ensures the diversity of inputs and mutual respect necessary for democratic deliberation. Some of what emerges here looks like traditional journalism, while some moves in radical new directions.

At a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Title</th>
<th>MIT Center for Civic Media</th>
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<tr>
<td>Project History</td>
<td>Established 2007</td>
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<td>Project Heads</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris Csikszentmihályi, MIT Media Lab</td>
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<td>William Uricchio, MIT CMS</td>
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<td>Mitchel Resnick, MIT Media Lab</td>
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<td>Current Makeup</td>
<td>2 graduates, 8 undergraduates, 15 staff</td>
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<td>For More Information</td>
<td>civic.mit.edu</td>
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What Partner Communities Have to Say About the Center for Civic Media and Its Projects

Various projects | South Wood County, Wisconsin

“Our partnership with MIT’s Center for Civic Media is a lever for influencing social change by motivating new thinking and behavior in central Wisconsin. The Center’s staff and students are respectful of community culture, perceptive in assessing opportunities and able to generate meaningful dialogue with a variety of audiences. In a community reeling from economic change and in the process of redevelopment, the fact that the Center sees us as a valued partner is a tremendous boost to self-confidence.”

– Kelly Lucas, CEO, Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County

Crónicas de Héroes (Hero Reports) | Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

“This is something that our city needs, especially young people. They need to know that every day in the city good things happen, and thanks to the selfless help of citizens, many problems can be avoided while others are resolved.”

– Juarez workshop participant

ExtrAct: News Positioning System | Texas

“News Positioning System is instrumental for us to make the case that we confront the pitfalls of mass incarceration throughout Texas and the South. As we tell the stories of individuals caught up in unjust, often race-based, prosecutions and incarcerations, the maps demonstrate that the problems we address with our narrative strategy aren’t isolated or unique, but rather are widespread and pervasive.”

– Lili Ibara, Friends of Justice founding member

Sourcemap | Scotland

“Sourcemap has the potential to be the benchmark web application for carbon footprint and supply chain mapping worldwide.”

– John Mackenzie, Development Manager, Innovation and Skills Team, Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Grassroots Mapping | Louisiana, Gulf Coast

“Grassroots Mapping tied in directly with the mission of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, putting scientific tools in the hands of Gulf Coast residents and providing the necessary techniques and training to empower the people of the Gulf region to take action and critically engage with the BP oil disaster.”

– Shannon Dosemagen, Member Action Associate, Louisiana Bucket Brigade