



Alberto Ibargüen on the Acceleration of Global Connectivity and Explosion of Digital Access

The impact of global connectivity on modern life is proving to be immense, and its reach is not limited to a single venue. “At the Knight Foundation, we’re convinced that we are about to see an acceleration in connectivity of all sorts, beginning with an explosion in digital access and participation by citizens in a fundamentally different way than ever before,” predicted Alberto Ibargüen, president and CEO of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and former publisher of the Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, at the opening keynote session of the University of Miami Global Business Forum Jan. 15 – 16, 2009.



Acknowledging that the Knight Foundation, which has given out more than \$400 million in grants supporting excellence in journalism and community vitality since its formation in 1950, does not count business among its own areas of focus, Ibargüen nevertheless maintained that issues around digital connectivity are as important to the business community as they are to the foundation. He encouraged everyone in attendance to consider the issues being discussed at the forum “in light of a new age of connectivity, and what it should mean to you and your business.”

Why should businesses care about the explosion in digital access? Ibargüen, a former University of Miami trustee, used the presidential campaign of Barack Obama as an example. Besides the obvious ways in which it was historical and precedent-setting, the campaign was groundbreaking in how it harnessed digital technology and social networking in the pursuit of political and ideological goals. He related how the campaign leveraged e-mails and social networks to create a sense of “connectedness” and inclusion in a community among Obama’s supporters. “That’s how [the Obama administration] will govern — that’s how they’ll lead. And in the process, they will change the communication expectations of Americans,” he declared.

Connectivity matters to businesses for two big reasons, one macro and one micro, Ibarгүй suggested. He cited a speech by Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke as indicative of the macro reason. Speaking at the London School of Economics in January, Bernanke singled out policy communications as an important tool and noted that recent events have made it clear that the world is “too interconnected for nations to go it alone” in their financial policies. The speech focused on substantive international cooperation, not digital access, Ibarгүй acknowledged, but he was struck by Bernanke’s recognition of the role media — meaning everyone who has access to the digital realm, not just news organizations — have in the interconnected world. “You can’t get any more macro than that,” he said.

The micro reason that connectivity matters to business has to do with the creation of opportunities and changed customer expectations. “When the world economic order functions in concert, when the president of the United States introduces social media as an everyday tool in the management of our civic affairs, when it becomes the policy of the United States that a citizen without digital access is a second-class citizen ... you’ll find not only an explosion of opportunity on the Web but a change in the way business is conducted and in the expectations of your customers,” he said. “Businesses need to learn how customers are going to relate to them in a different way as a result of those changes.”

Ibarгүй offered up the Knight Foundation as a possible role model for companies interested in exploring new ways to interact with their customers, noting its three basic operating principles: The foundation believes the role of information is to enable citizens to determine their own true interests; that the most responsible thing it can do during this period of enormous change is to experiment and learn; and that since the best communities are informed and engaged, the foundation supports programs and projects that lead to that end.

Historically, there has been a notion that units of government, local and regional economies, and social patterns should be consistent with information delivery and sharing. Such “spheres of shared information” could be defined by the circulation area of a newspaper or by the reach of a local radio or TV station as recently as a few years ago. “Just think how dated that sounds” in the age of Google, YouTube and Facebook, Ibarгүй said. Rather than lamenting the change, however, a more productive approach is to embrace it and “make it yours, infusing it with your values,” he suggested.

Ibarгүй also discussed the Knight Foundation’s efforts to foster engaged and informed communities, especially the Knight News Challenge and the Knight Center for Digital Excellence. Now in its third year, the Knight News Challenge provides \$5 million in grants annually to fund ideas that use digital platforms to deliver news and information to geographically defined communities. A recent recipient is Tim Berners-Lee, credited with inventing the World Wide Web, who is working on a program that would address the lack of authenticity on the Web by enabling users to function as a virtual equivalent of traditional

media's fact-checking departments. The Knight Center for Digital Excellence is a \$24 million pro bono consulting organization to help level the playing field between public and commercial interests in providing digital access.

The foundation also provides \$4 million a year in grants to meet the core needs of communities. One such effort is working to bridge the digital "gray" divide in Coral Gables, Fla. In partnership with the University of Miami School of Communications, the Coral Gables Community Foundation is boosting engagement of older citizens on the Web by helping to create and maintain a digital news site for seniors. University students will train seniors to report, write and blog for the site.

In closing, Ibargüen reminded attendees at the Global Business Forum, for which the Knight Foundation was the presenting sponsor, that information is a core need for communities in a democracy and a core need for commerce. "How that information is delivered and used will increasingly determine the health of communities and the success of your enterprise," he said.

— *Michael J. McDermott*

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