Canadian Public Interest Journalism and Democracy

Wasan Island Retreat · June 25–28, 2019

COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS OF CANADA

McConnell

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Location

Wasan Island is located on Lake Rosseau in the Muskoka Lakes in Northern Ontario. The island is owned and operated by the German Breuninger Foundation. From summer to fall, dozens of Canadian and international groups come together on the island for gatherings of all kinds.

Land Acknowledgement

Wasan Island is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, which is covered by the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850 and the William Treaty of 1923. Three nations are represented in this area: the Anishinabe (Ojibway), Mohawk and Pottawatomi. There are several neighbouring First Nations communities whose ancestors live(d) in the area amongst which are the Rama (Mnjikaning), Wahta, and Wasauksing (Parry Island).

Background and Purpose

The truth about stories is, that's all we are.
— Thomas King, novelist

In Canada and around the world, traditional media are in a time of transition and disruption.

The Public Policy Forum's 2017 **Shattered Media Report** detailed a media landscape that is in crisis with **hundreds of news outlets closing** and more reducing service. The crisis continues: from 2008 to June 1st 2019, 278 local news outlets have closed in 199 communities. Additionally, 74 news outlets have cut service in 48 places, as detailed in Ryerson University's **Local News Project.**

Yet, there are also opportunities. Over the same period, 111 local news outlets have launched in 83 locations. In **"The Rise of Audience Funded Journalism,"** The Discourse found a vibrant sub-sector of independent, mostly digital, media with a growing base of paying subscribers. This sub-sector is « innovative, dynamic, fast-growing and positioned to have a disproportionate impact on the renewal of the Canadian news ecosystem". Similar findings are coming out of NYU and the **Membership Puzzle Project.** In the United States, new issue-driven collaborative models are emerging such as **six Florida newsrooms teaming up** and also the International **Climate Desk.**

These changes in the media landscape are happening at a time when we are arguably most in need of a thriving journalistic ecosystem. The challenges we face are complex, and there is a pressing need to share solutions to these problems, to build trust between individuals and communities, and for communities to see themselves and the issues they care about reflected in local journalism.

As a result of these dynamics, there is growing interest in Canadian philanthropy in exploring support for a healthier media landscape that serves and reflects the aspirations and wellbeing of communities across the country.
Over the last year, a Journalism Funders Affinity Group has been convening every couple of months to share best practices and discuss ways forward and changes in the landscape. A report from their initial convening can be found **here.**

Against this backdrop, the McConnell Foundation and Community Foundations of Canada, brought together a group of stakeholders working at the intersection of public interest journalism and democracy to build relationships, deepen collective understanding of the connections between a healthy democracy and public interest journalism, and to explore potential interventions across sectors.

Participants

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Stina Brown	**Independent Facilitator**
Laurel Carlton	**Community Foundations of Canada**
Julie Caron-Malenfant	**Institut du Nouveau Monde**
Grace Diffey	**Hamilton Community Foundation**
Miriam Fahmy	**Independent Consultant**
Teresa Gorman	**Democracy Fund**
Ana Sofia Hibon	**McConnell Foundation**
April Lindgren	**Ryerson University's School of Journalism**
Caro Loutfi	**Apathy is Boring**
Chad Lubelsky	**McConnell Foundation**
Kevin McCort	**Vancouver Foundation**
Rachel Pulfer	**Journalists for Human Rights**
Maggie Reid	**King Squared Media**
Tina Rosenberg	**Solutions Journalism Network**
Fateema Sayani	**Ottawa Community Foundation**
Daniel Savas	**SFU Centre for Dialogue**
Ana Serrano	**Canadian Film Centre Media Lab**
Pat Thompson	**Atkinson Foundation**
Claire Trottier	**Trottier Foundation**
Sadia Zaman	**Inspirit Foundation**

Lines of Inquiry

Some of the questions we brought to the convening were:

- **How can philanthropy contribute positively to the state of democracy and public interest journalism in Canada?**

- How can we create an informed, engaged citizenry through public interest journalism?

- How can we work better together?

- What does 2030 look like for those working at the intersection of journalism, democracy and community wellbeing?

- **How do we mitigate the spread of misinformation and its impacts on democracy?**

- What is the role of other holders of community knowledge?

- How do we support communities in defining their own editorial priorities?

- How has the quality of news been affected by precarious employment in the field of journalism? Do "entrepreneurial journalists" have decent work?

Journalism in Transition
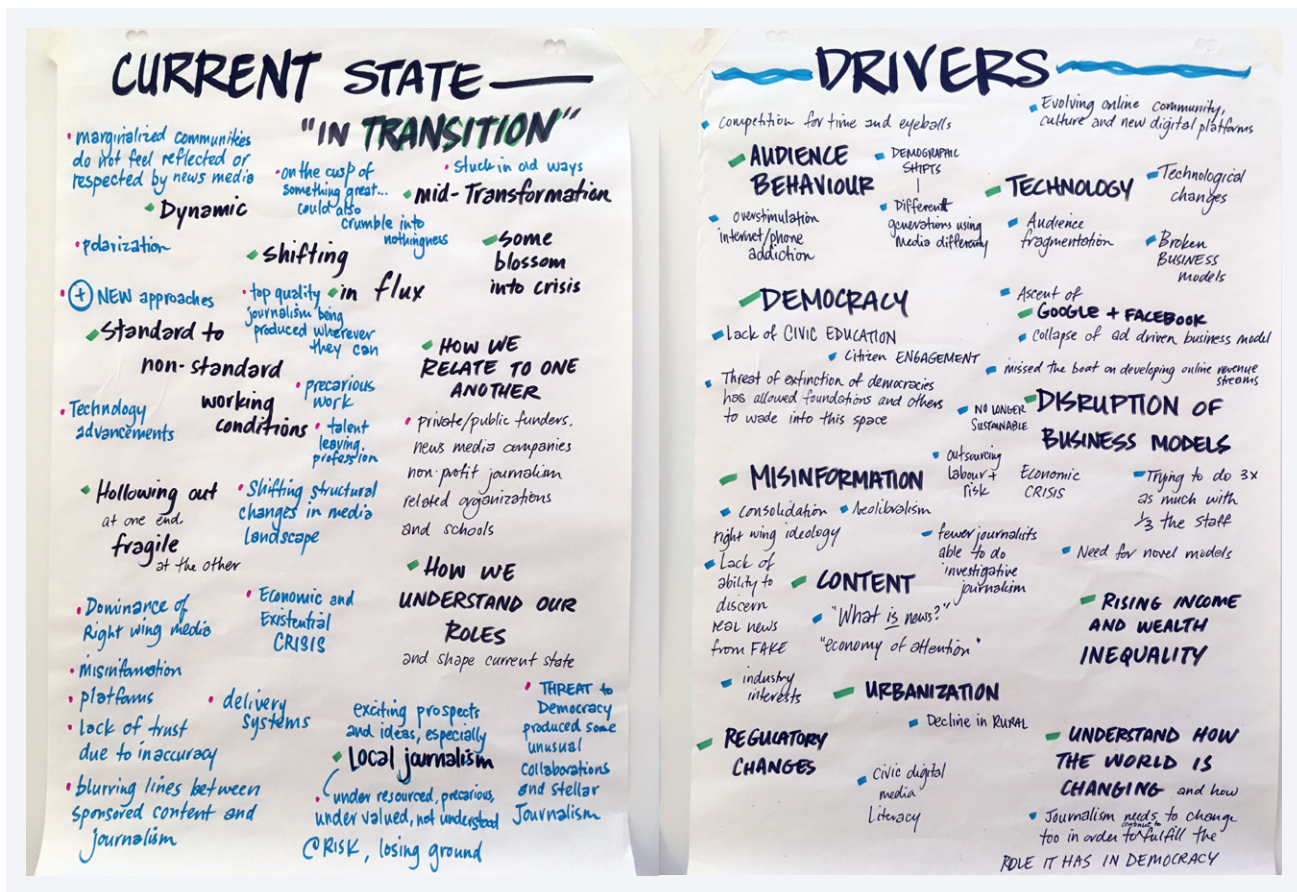
Journalism is in the midst of rapid transformation driven by the digitalization of our public sphere, a shift in audience behaviours, regulatory changes and other factors.

Within this transition, tensions abound: For example, the decentralization revolution of journalism production is supporting an increasingly diverse and democratic independent media sector. However, this is also leading to growing mistrust in journalistic content and increased misinformation within the "economy of attention".

Current Reality

The State of Democracy in Canada: Context matters when talking about "a crisis in democracy". Canada has one of the most robust sets of democratic institutions and processes in the world yet there are signs of waning confidence in the capacity of our democracy to provide outcomes aligned with citizen's interests and lived experiences.

Lessons from the US on media ecosystems: Adopting an asset mindset is key to shaping a public interest journalism ecosystem that strengthens and heals our democratic and community wellbeing. Focusing on "saving the media" is not enough. An asset-based approach requires a culture of trust and relationship building both at the local and national level.

Building a healthy media ecosystem: A systemic approach to improving our media ecosystem requires supporting new voices and platforms to emerge in service of citizens, who are best placed to identify the pressing social issues in their communities. Our participants highlighted the recent coverage of the final report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls as an opportunity to engage new and legacy media in deeper discussions around Reconciliation.

Key Takeaways

- **Equity:** Some participants expressed a sense of urgency in redefining who gets access to telling and profiting from the stories we see in the media and in increasing diversity in representation.

- **Trust:** A lack of citizen engagement is a lack of hope and trust. We need to focus on the value systems that bring communities together. In this process, local institutions can support structures for relevant local news and information sharing.

- **Funding:** We are entering a different era in funding models for journalism and citizen engagement. As a new actor in the sector, philanthropy can bring in new tools including (but not limited to) new forms of capital and investment.

- **Appreciative approach:** Adopting an asset mindset is crucial in moving this work forward. Canada has many assets to leverage. Among these, we highlighted: bilingualism, continued interest in journalism in post-secondary education, strong freedom of press, new models of collaboration in media and rising support for audience-funded journalism.

For additional details on the strengths, opportunities, drivers and blind spots of the sector see Appendix 2.

Future Realities

"**What can we imagine the world to look like in 2030, if our positive efforts are successful?**"

There is a pressing need for journalism and civic engagement initiatives to meet citizenry where it is at. If, from now until 2030, we acknowledge barriers to engagement and focus on content production that is accessible, engaging, relevant and representative, journalism can be a backbone for diverse and interconnected networks of citizens and communities.

By 2030, solutions-oriented approaches to journalism could play a major role in countering the apathy that ensues from the "steady diet of failure and disfunction" that we currently consume. Placing the spotlight on solutions to widely shared problems can support a collective reimagining of the stories and futures that communities are already working towards.

The threats to journalism in democracies around the world have fostered innovative collaborations in the sector. Through these emerging collaborations, we have an opportunity to imagine and create networks of media that are connected to news deserts and to communities who are currently misrepresented in mainstream stories.

The news media industry has historically benefited from strong professional associations that uphold ethical standards. This framework will continue to be key to the integrity of the news gathering system and trustworthiness of innovative approaches to journalism.

Mental Models and Systems Thinking
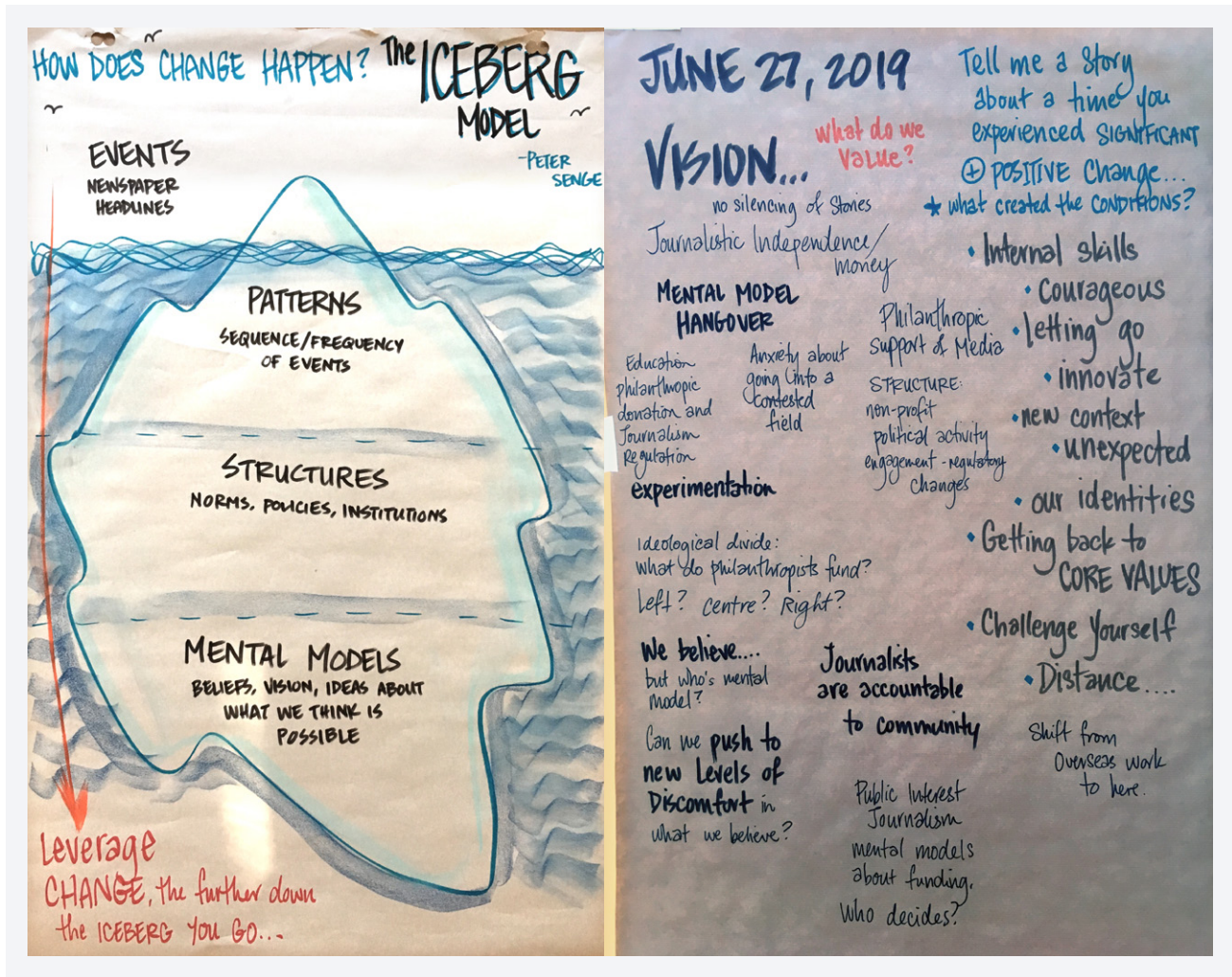
Using Reos Partner's Iceberg Model as a framework, the group explored where change needs to happen in order to achieve our 2030 vision.

"Systems thinking looks at the interconnections and relationships between the different parts of a system, not just at the parts themselves... **The iceberg makes us look at a system through different lenses.** It forces us to expand our horizons and not consider just a single activity or event, but to step back and identify the different patterns that that event is part of, the possible structures that might be causing it to occur, and finally, the thinking that is creating those structures. It is through changing the way we think that we can effect the transformation that we seek" *.

Key Questions and Takeaways

Mental model hangover: recent **regulatory changes in journalism** and in **political activities of Canadian charities** have not yet changed our collective understanding of what is and is not possible with regard to funding public interest journalism and citizen engagement. In other words, our actions and thinking are trapped in transition between the old and the new, and we haven't yet begun to fully explore the new possibilities on the horizon.

Regulatory experimentation: Journalism is undergoing rapid change. This is a great opportunity to experiment with new and adaptive forms of regulation.

Funding: There is reticence around philanthropic involvement in media funding due to a perceived threat to journalistic independence.

Power: Can we co-create media governance models that do not replicate the usual patterns of concentration of power?

Unpacking journalism as a public good: Is the agenda of public interest journalism up to the journalists or to the communities they serve?

Visions for the Future
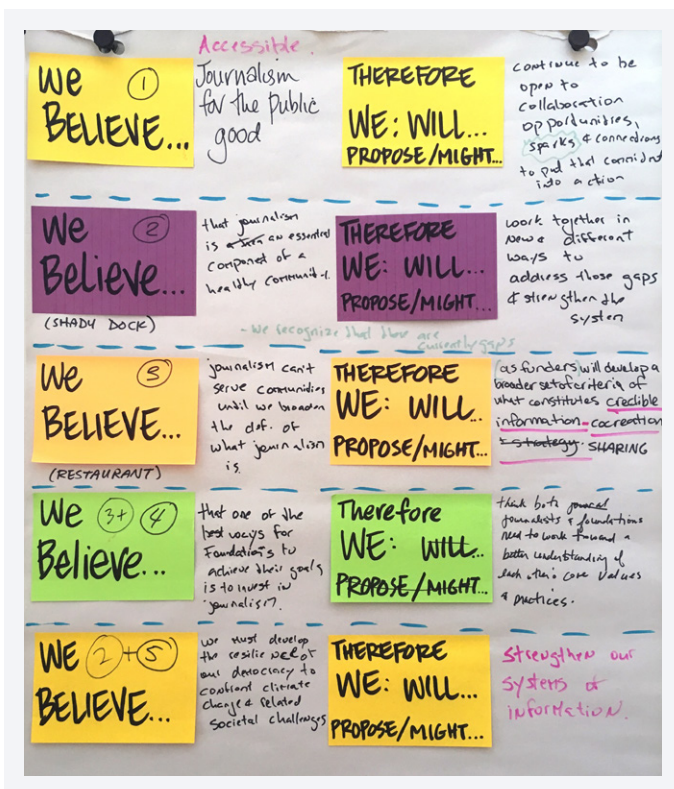
We believe in accessible journalism for the public good. Therefore, we will continue to be open to collaboration opportunities, sparks and connections to put that commitment into action.

We believe that journalism is an essential component of a healthy community and we recognize that gaps exist. Therefore, we will work together in new and different ways to address those gaps and strengthen the system.

We believe journalism can't serve communities until we broaden the definition of what journalism is. Therefore, as funders, we will develop and share a broader set of criteria of what constitutes credible information, co-creation and sharing.

We believe that one of the best ways for foundations to achieve their goals is to invest in journalism. Therefore, both journalists and funders need to work toward a better understanding of each other's core values and practices.

We believe we must develop the resilience of our democracy and communities to confront major societal changes. Therefore, we will strengthen our systems of information to ensure that they are independent, credible, and accessible.

What does successful collaboration look like?

Public Interest Journalism and Community Wellbeing

- There is a crossover between community vitality, democratic health and community knowledge ecosystems (which include journalism and storytelling). See Pew Research **here.**

- As journalism becomes a charitable activity, we must **manage expectations** on the limits of philanthropic dollars that will support community public interest journalism.

- How can we better **leverage research** like, **Vital Signs**, which in many communities is a key reference point?
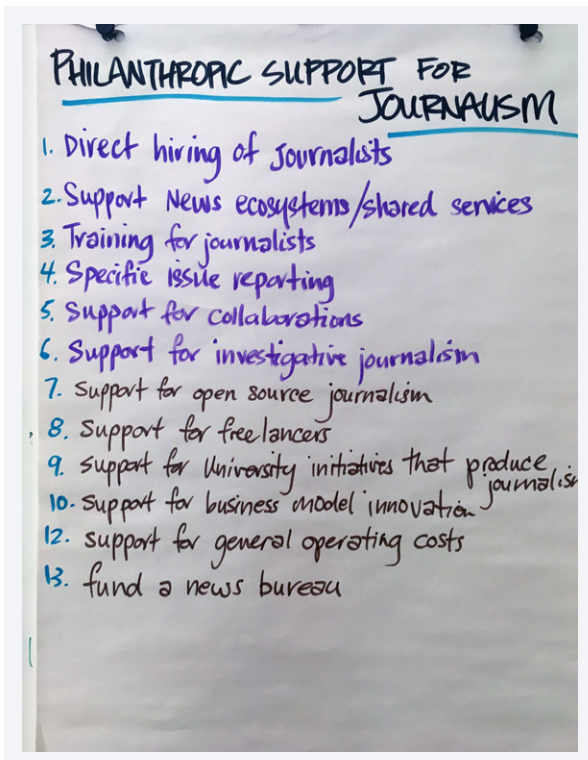
New Ways of Engagement

- Philanthropy must be open to **agile experimentation** and rapid prototyping.

- Meaningful engagement means bringing more than financial resources to the table.

- To support long-lasting social change, funders must shift from a responsive to a **solutions-oriented** approach.

- What are the positive and negative implications of replacing professionally-trained journalists with **other forms of community knowledge gathering and dissemination**?

Collaboration

- Media organizations, public and private funders, journalism-related non-profits, journalism schools, and other players are taking on **new roles and ways of engaging**.

- Some examples of this include: the newly formed Canadian Independent Media Association, the Institute for Investigative Journalism at Concordia University, the Toronto Star's Labour and Wealth beat, and others.

- The openness of community foundations to work with each other is an important asset.

- Key question: Are foundations a permanent actor in this system or will they provide temporary relief while the journalism sector transitions to its next iteration?

April Lindgren, from Ryerson University's School of Journalism shared 13 ways through which philanthropy can support journalism. These insights are part of an ongoing research project.

Closing thoughts, lingering questions and topics for further exploration

- The regulatory framework doesn't need to dominate. We as citizens have **agency** around our own interests and movement building.

- Be aware of the risk of **incentivizing precarity** in industries and sectors in transition. Advocate for fair work in journalism.

- We want and need to bridge information and **trust gaps** in media with regard to youth. How can we support relevant and reliable content?

- Pay close attention to the **new CRA charity funding category** and related opportunities.

- There is value in continuing to unpack the **"public interest"** in public interest journalism

- Explore new ways to support **business model innovation**.

- Push for **mental model shifts** within foundations. We are challenging and expanding what we think is possible, to rise to the challenges of our times.

McConnell and CFC Next Steps

- Play a **strategic orchestration** role: including convening a Funder's Affinity Group

- Look for **concrete opportunities** to collaborate: Eg, Potentially supporting the new Independent Media Association, supporting local news platforms, business model innovation, etc.

- Create and **share this report** and other relevant research and documentation

- Create and share a **repository of promising practices**

- Explore organizing a **study tour** and other learning opportunities

- Explore **existing funding** opportunities and share with others

- Continue to engage with the **Federal government**

- Explore **increasing "solutions journalism"** reporting in Canada

- Convene a followup session on **Digital Threats to Democracy**

- Work toward **increasing the number of funders** active in this space

Appendix

A co-created list of resources related to public interest journalism and democracy can be found **here**.

Appendix 1: A word from our facilitator Stina Brown

Approach to the Design of the Gathering:
This was an invitation-only retreat, with a pre-gathering survey conducted in order to invite participants to begin reflecting and considering their priorities. Our meeting design was flexible and we prioritized the topics and areas of focus that had the most energy or curiosity. There were some predetermined outcomes, and some emergent.

As we moved through the days' dialogues, we held a sense of discovery and trust with participants sharing ownership in the process. Participants described the gathering as an open and caring road to develop trust and as having a non-competitive mood and wellness as an explicit intention.

Other culture-setting aspects:

- We named having an "appreciative approach" or "asset-mindset" from the start. This kept us "out of the weeds" of focusing on the problems facing the field.

- We agreed to leave technology (including phones) outside the session space.

- We invited participants to speak in the language they were most comfortable in.

Systems Seer/Creative Questioner Role:
We invited one of our participants to play a "systems seer/creative questioner" role. This role plays a part in unfolding a group's best thinking by paying added attention to the patterns, quotable moments, energy and focus of the group. In a conversation, we can often lose sight of the bigger picture, become enamored with our own ideas. Systems Seers deepen a group's conversations with provocative questions. Through a "systems lens", our Systems Seer synthesized some of her observations over the arc of the day, gave members a chance to go deeper into why this work matters and helped the group push beyond habitual thinking. Some of her documented observations and questions are below:

- We are entering this conversation with a sense of urgency and anxiety.

- This disruptive moment presents risks and opportunities.

- There is no one solution.

- There needs to be trust before anything else.

- We need to have an asset-based approach.

- As actors who are entrenched in the system that we are analyzing, are we seeing it with whole, new eyes? Are there gaps between our perception and other stakeholders' perception (citizens, journalists)?

- Should philanthropy support the factors that lead to more demand for journalism instead of journalism itself? I.e. the public's interest in public interest journalism?

- Information shapes our collective conversation and that collective conversation is the basis for the democratic process. How can philanthropy facilitate this process without controlling it?

- A lot of capacity has been built in the journalism field over the past decades, how do we make sure we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater?

- What are the governance models that don't replicate the usual patterns of concentration of power?

- How does philanthropy support journalism while protected complete independence? How does that balance out with the expectations set for other categories of donees?

- For how long? When does philanthropy "get out"?

- How does philanthropy build equity into its support system?

Appendix 2A: Notes from our current state and opportunities discussion

STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES

More opportunities for new voices
Strong political support for freedom of press
New business model aligns+great journalism →more accountability to audience →rise of audience-funded
Shift from "free" digital to more willingness to pay
How to surface new/diverse voices to larger audiences

Pay for access model
↓
new overlords?

what does this mean for access to info

Small local paper
The Suburban

Community weeklies demise

Apple news model like "spotify"

Venture capital ←
↓
"Big populist" journalism
↓ demise
Lower levels of clickbait??

Demise of aggregators
↓ move to
offline news site
eg thetyee
the logic → thick paywall

WEAKNESSES, THREATS, CHALLENGES, BA...

Low % of Canadians willing to pay for journalism (that they trust)
(9%)? ↳ 40%?

The guardian → successful in $

journalism job loss is greater than job loss than other sectors

NPR model
↳ wyoming get subsidies from NYC
↓ Why are people paying?
More intimate relationships w audience sense of building a brand? community?

Not just newspaper.
CBC, CTV, Quebecor, Global

Radio CBC radio

Where is CBC spending $1B
↳ + precarious labour

Keeping younger canadian in news

Millenials disengages from traditional sources

Youth perspective of accessible media
↓
videos from groups in US that don't exist here
Facebook groups in remote communities

TRENDS, DRIVERS,

Canadians better @ identifying fake news
50% claim to check sources
However still likely to see news they disagree with as true

Successful for-profit model more sensational + driving a given narrative

Appendix 2B: Notes from our current state and opportunities discussion

STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES
- Clean slate/philanthropy: New era
- Horizon opening/New actors/New energy/urgency
- Learn from others
- More connected, greater possibility of connection
- Digital: tools of production democratized
- Philanthropic tools more available: impact investing, other forms of capital. New definition of charitable activity

WEAKNESSES, THREATS, CHALLENGES, ~~FACTORS~~ BARRIERS
- People don't understand threat to journalism/ecosystem
- rising income and wealth inequality
- inequality of voice - not democratic
- digital access/divide
- ~~Competition for~~ resources
- Too common understanding of public good and journalism
- weakness in terminology around world journalism

TRENDS, DRIVERS, OTHER CONSIDERATIONS
- need to hold tension between old + new
- Collaboration as driver
- continued interest in journalism education at grad level
- urbanization - digital divide, rising news poverty

Appendix 2C: Notes from our current state and opportunities discussion

STRENGTHS + OPPORTUNITIES...?

Tradition of High
• Quality News & Info.
• Press freedom.

↑ Awareness ~~[crossed out]~~
→ Youth engagement
→ Strengthening civic education.
→

WEAKNESSES, THREATS, CHALLENGES, BARRIERS

• Power (distribution of, kind of power.) Unacknowledged power.

| everyone like silo.

• access to info.
• low voters turn out [awareness of the elite (vs) not enough concern on the ground] → risk of turning into a populist narrative.
• politeness

TRENDS, DRIVERS, OTHER CONSIDERATIONS?

• Blind spots: not taking youth into consideration
    philanthropy is perpetrating the "usual suspects" conversation.
• a lot of former journalist are working in foundations & are trapped in their "journalist" mindset.
• why care about journalism & democracy.
• Give unrestricted funds. "the chilling effect" of slap
• Protection for journalists/people who want to tell the ~~[crossed out]~~ truth.