The WIDget: Turning Words Into Deeds
A response to the Knight Foundation's 21st Century News Challenge

Social Signal
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The Knight Foundation has issued a 21st Century News Challenge, a call for:

- new ways to understand news and act on it, including new ways to collect, prepare and distribute information, news and journalism that reveals hard-to-know facts, identifies common problems, clarifies community issues and points out practical courses of action.

- new ways for people to communicate interactively to better understand one another, to generate real passion in solving local problems and to share the know-how they need to improve their communities;

- new ways for people to use information, news and journalism to imagine their collective possibilities as communities, and to set and reach common community goals. *(see http://www.newschallenge.org)*

Social Signal is developing a proposal for a new project, **Words Into Deeds**. We are currently seeking partners and supporters for this proposal, so that we can demonstrate the active interest of the organizations that will help make this project a success.

About the project

We all recognize the media's crucial role in inspiring and enabling social change and community development. America's tradition of public service journalism has been key to social shifts on everything from race relations to government accountability to fighting AIDS. But what makes for a transformative media moment: a moment when an individual reads, watches or hears a news story and is galvanized to take action on an issue?

Words Into Deeds will catalyze those transformative media moments by using the latest Internet tools to match issue-oriented journalism with opportunities for concrete citizen engagement. Through a Words Into Deeds widget (WIDget), online media outlets, blogs, audio and video sites will be able to complement any issue-specific story with a set of related volunteer and donation opportunities.

For example, if you're reading an article about child labor in Africa on the web site of the *New York Times*, you might see a call to sponsor a child or review the text of a child labor agreement; if you're checking out a YouTube video about stem cell research you might find an opportunity to donate umbilical cord cells or money for Parkinson's research. By exposing volunteer and donation opportunities in the immediate context of an issue-related news story, the WIDget aims to dramatically expand the number of media consumers who are moved to community action.

Figure 1: Mock-up of a media site featuring the WIDget

The WIDget makes the most of several recent developments:

- databases that organize nonprofit donation opportunities, volunteer opportunities, and even more recently, micro-volunteer opportunities (opportunities to immediately undertake a useful 5- or 10-minutes worth of volunteer effort, online). The WIDget will expose these opportunities directly on media sites.
- application programming interfaces (APIs) and microformats (like XML) that focus on establishing connections between web resources rather than establishing new independent sites. The WIDget will essentially take the form of an interface or microformat that connects media sites and nonprofit resources without requiring centralization or even direct cooperation.
- tags – user-assigned taxonomic keywords – provide a bottom-up way of organizing information. The WIDget will use tags to match news stories to the appropriate community opportunities.

While media outlets are increasingly making use of tag- or keyword-generated content (like Google adwords, or related blog posts from Technorati) these tools serve no overarching social mandate. And while a number of organizations have undertaken the work of organizing donor, volunteer, and micro-volunteer opportunities into databases, applications for these databases are only just

emerging. The WIDget will offer a lightweight but powerful way of connecting media demand for related content with the growing wealth of data on community opportunities in order to dramatically expand the number of media consumers who are moved to act by the stories they read, watch or hear.

We anticipate that both media outlets and nonprofit organizations will be highly motivated to make use of the WIDget. WIDget offers

■ For media outlets – including the online versions of traditional media, as well as blog, audio and video sites: a cost-free, virtually effortless way to make good on the promise of public service journalism
■ For citizen media outlets (e.g. bloggers, YouTube): an opportunity to demonstrate the concrete relevance of their work.
■ For nonprofit organizations represented in WIDget-connected databases: a new stream of pre-activated donors and volunteers.
■ For nonprofits who maintain the databases of volunteer and donor opportunities: a way to support the organizations in their databases, and to potentially receive a portion of click-through donations.

While these click-through donations could be an important and sustaining source of revenue for participating organizations and for the WIDget project, we feel it is important to emphasize the volunteer and, particularly, micro-volunteer opportunities presented by the WIDget. For that reason we envision framing financial donations as purchases of "volunteerism credits" – something equivalent to the carbon credits that let people offset their carbon emissions. Our goal is to encourage direct community engagement, but to provide a financial alternative for people who would prefer to fund others to undertake community activities.

Why WIDget... and why Social Signal

Social Signal is ideally positioned to lead the development on the WIDget. As a small company that specializes in helping nonprofit and socially-driven organizations tap the latest generation of Internet tools, we understand the organizational, technical and communications challenges involved in developing a decentralized community solution like the WIDget. Our record of successfully launching community-oriented "Web 2.0" projects – such as telecentre.org, the NetSquared online community, and Change Everything – shows we can help nonprofit organizations leverage limited resources for big online impact. We're now ready to take the passion we've brought to client projects and direct it at an initiative of our own: the WIDget.

We're convinced that the WIDget promises a new wave of transformative media moments: moments when reading, listening to or viewing a news story moves the media consumer to take action on an issue. It's an ambitious vision, resting on a remarkably accessible tool; by making it easy and compelling for both media outlets and nonprofit databases to connect data across contexts, the WIDget can facilitate cooperation with very limited coordination. The ultimate impact of that coordination rests not with the WIDget, nor even with the media outlets or nonprofit databases involved, but with the sensitivities and motivations of media consumer-citizens.

How you can help make WIDget a reality

While the WIDget's design minimizes the requirements for up-front coordination, its deployment will be accelerated by the active participation of organizations that maintain nonprofit databases, and media outlets that might deploy the WIDget on their sites. You can help with this process if you are:

- A nonprofit organization that maintains organizational databases: contact Social Signal to add your database to the list of databases that will be tapped by the WIDget.
- A nonprofit organization that wants to promote its donor or volunteer opportunities: contact Social Signal to add your organization's name to the list of nonprofits who want to appear in WIDget listings.
- A media outlet or blogger: contact Social Signal to add your outlet or blog site to the list of outlets that would deploy the WIDget to offer volunteer and donor opportunities to your readers.
- An interested observer: share your thoughts about this proposal by commenting on our blog (see http://www.socialsignal.com/widget) or by emailing Social Signal.

To contact Social Signal, please e-mail widget@socialsignal.com. We need to submit our proposal by December 31, 2006, so we'd be particularly interested in hearing from prospective partners who would like to be part of that proposal.

About Social Signal

Social Signal, incorporated in 2005, merged the long-standing consulting practices of two leading practitioners in online community and online advocacy. Alexandra Samuel, Social Signal's CEO, has consulted, researched and written on Internet politics, e-government and online community since 1996. Rob Cottingham, Social Signal's president, has over seventeen years of social marketing and communications experience, and has designed and developed a wide range of online education and advocacy projects.

Alexandra combines hands-on experience implementing online strategies with an extensive research background in digital democracy, e-governance and Internet activism. Her recent projects include managing the online launch of telecentre.org, a platform that will support a global community for community technology centres around the world; developing the online community strategy for NetSquared.org, an initiative to expand the strategic technology capacity for the more than 50,000 nonprofit organizations that work with CompuMentor/TechSoup; and launching the Civic Minded blog on e-democracy issues for Corante. Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University, where her research focused on the creative frontiers of online political engagement. She has since developed and taught an undergraduate course on The Internet and Politics at the University of British Columbia, an online stakeholder engagement workshop at Simon Fraser University, and a blogging workshop for the Hollyhock Leadership Institute.

Rob is a seasoned communications strategist who is known online as an e-campaigning innovator, and offline as one of Canada's leading speechwriters. His recent projects include creating the Confeederation election blog aggregator and writing the final report for the Prime Minister's External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. Rob has also led numerous web development projects, including the web site for the BC Teachers for BC Kids campaign, and BC's Tobacco Facts web site. Rob maintains a long-running blog at robcottingham.ca and writes SpeechList, a free e-mail newsletter on speechwriting. Offline, Rob is best known as one of Canada's leading public affairs speechwriters.

With the support of their staff and an experienced team of web design, programming and hosting contractors, Alex and Rob offer a unique combination of strategic capacity, communications skills, and implementation smarts. Their integrated solutions offer a new option for public-facing organizations seeking to engage audiences through online communities that meet communications needs, policy priorities and interactive opportunities.