

A Beacon for Democracy: The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas

by SUMMER HARLOW

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THOUSANDS OF JOURNALISTS IN LATIN America and the Caribbean have benefited in the past eight years from a special program at the University of Texas at Austin: The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. In its efforts

to defend press freedom, help generate quality journalism and thus strengthen democracy throughout the hemisphere, the Knight Center has developed unique online and offline programs, such as distance learning courses, a trilingual blog, and various workshops and conferences that have made it the world's leading resource for journalism in the Americas.

The Knight Center was created in 2002 with a \$2 million grant from the Knight Foundation, with four main goals: (1) to create a training program for journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean; (2) to connect training with organizational capacity building by stimulating journalists to create self-sustaining, independent, and local organizations that could train local journalists in a permanent way; (3) to create a strong trilingual Web site and online distance learning program; and, finally, (4) to sponsor an annual conference in Austin to give an opportunity to these newly created organizations to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

"When we started we expected to reach 500 journalists in four years," says Prof. Rosental Calmon Alves, Knight Center founder and director. "We met that goal in the first few months."

Since then, the Knight Center has continued to exceed all expectations, offering more online courses each year, publishing electronic books, expanding the readership of its newsletter and blog, and conducting conferences both in Austin and abroad.

"What we offer is unlike anywhere else," says Alves. "No one else is a reference like we are for journalism in the hemisphere." For example, the trilingual Web site in Spanish, Portuguese, and English offers resources

such as a digital library, and information about journalism events in the region. Also, besides a monthly newsletter, the Knight Center updates daily its trilingual blog with the latest journalism headlines and news from the Americas.

The Knight Center's emphasis on building capacity and supporting local organizations—rather than just parachuting into a country, teaching journalists something new, and then leaving them on their own—also is part of what has made the center so successful, Alves says. For example, the Knight Center helped create the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRAJI) in Brazil and the Argentine Journalism Forum (FOPEA) in Argentina, which both have gone on to become the main professional organizations in those countries, working to train local journalists and improve local journalism. "We believe stronger journalism will strengthen democracy and therefore will increase the well-being of people in those countries," Alves said. "That's the reason we do this."

Currently, the Knight Center is in the third year of a second four-year grant period from the Knight Foundation, this one received in 2007. During this second phase, the Knight Center has refocused to place more of an emphasis on digital journalism and helping journalists throughout the hemisphere cope with the challenges of the Digital Era. "Our motto now is that the Knight Center teaches great journalists how to use digital technologies, and uses these digital technologies to teach great journalism," Alves said.

Thus, the Knight Center has concentrated on enhancing its online distance learning program, which started in 2003. Nearly 3,000 journalists from Latin America and the Caribbean have enrolled in an online course through the program.

So far in 2010, the Knight Center has offered such courses as Digital Tools for Journalists (in Spanish), Electoral Coverage and Democracy (in Spanish), Introduction to Journalism 2.0 (in Portuguese),

Computer-Assisted Reporting (in Portuguese), Covering Drug Trafficking (in Spanish), and Digital Media Project Development (in Spanish). The latter, a new course that attracted a record number of applicants, taught journalists the basics of creating digital media projects, such as content strategy, search engine optimization, content syndication, socialistics, metrics, and monetization aspects. The Knight Center's distance learning program has been so successful that it has been used as a model for many other organizations in the United States and farther south.

As part of the emphasis on digital technologies, the Knight Center has published electronic books that have been downloaded more than 50,000 times and often are printed and distributed in newsrooms all over the hemisphere. One book is called *Journalism 2.0* by U.S. journalist Mark Briggs, and another is *How to Write for the Web* by Colombian journalist Guillermo Franco. The most recent book is *Digital Tools for Journalists* by Argentine journalist Sandra Crucianelli. All three authors have been instructors in the Knight Center distance education program and have used their e-books in their classes.

Currently, after the recently launched redesign of its Web site, the Knight Center is striving to diversify its funders, looking for grant money from organizations beyond the Knight Foundation. "Our challenge now is to work on the long-term sustainability of the Knight Center," says Alves.

The Knight Center has worked successfully mostly thanks to funds from the Knight Foundation and the University of Texas College of Communication and School of Journalism. Most recently, however, it also has received funds from the Open Society Institute's Media Program and the McCormick Foundation.

Funds from OSI's Media Program helped the Knight Center in recent years to expand its annual meeting of journalism organizations from Latin America and the Caribbean, the *Austin Forum on Journalism in the Americas*. The roundtable style conference has been held annually since 2003, and in the past three years, with OSI help, had more participants than ever. These conferences were organized around specific topics, such as "Freedom of Expression Monitoring and Advocacy," "Investigative Journalism," and "The Impact of the Digital Technology on Journalism and Democracy."

Funding from the McCormick Institute was used for a unique cross-border training program aimed at journalists from Mexico and the United States who cover the illegal drug trade. The McCormick Foundation Specialized Reporting Institute, *Cross-border Coverage of U.S.-Mexico Drug Trafficking*, took place in Austin March 26–27, 2010 and brought together fourteen journalists from the United States and twelve from Mexico.

The participants, from media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *El Universal*, *Proceso*, and other publications, as well as a television station located on the border, took part in roundtable discussions facilitated by Colombian journalist Alvaro Sierra of the United Nations's University for Peace in San José, Costa Rica. Sierra also is the instructor for the Knight Center's online course *Covering Drug Trafficking*.

Each year the Knight Center also sponsors other annual conferences in addition to the *Austin Forum*. The *11th International Symposium on Online Journalism*, for example, was held on the UT campus in April 2010. It attracted more than 270 journalists, scholars, and media executives from around the globe to Austin. It was followed by the *Ibero-American Colloquium on Digital Journalism* with more than thirty journalists from twelve Latin American countries, Portugal, and Spain.

In a September 19, 2004, article in the *Austin American-Statesman*, editor Richard Oppel talked about the emergence of democracy throughout Latin America during the last decades and about the problems that journalists still face in the hemisphere. Thanks to the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin, Oppel wrote, "Austin can take pride in the fact that democracy is one of our exports ... A beacon of freedom—seen across a hemisphere—glows from a little room above Guadalupe and Dean Keeton."

As Jack Knight wrote when celebrating the first Pulitzer Prize at one of his newspapers, "True journalism ... is the beacon light of this new experiment we call democracy." Indeed, the Knight Center has been such a beacon of light for thousands of journalists from this hemisphere who are interested in improving their skills to better serve their communities and their countries. "A watchdog, independent press is a fundamental part of the checks and balances of democracy," Alves says. "And when

the citizenry is better informed, democracy works better and in a strong way. We are proud that we contribute to that in so many countries with our work at the Knight Center."

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PROGRESS OF NOTE:

- During the 2008–2009 academic year alone, the Knight Center **trained 2,756 journalists**, more than 25% above the goal for the entire 2007–2011 time frame.
- Also in 2008–2009, the Knight Center **reached 1,496 journalists with workshops and seminars**, ten times more than the goal of 150.
- The Knight Center **organized 18 online courses** (10 more than forecast), reaching 1,260 journalists (more than triple the number of journalists planned for 2008–2009).
- The number of absolute unique users on the Knight Center's trilingual **Web site jumped from 38,907 in 2007–2008 to 174,065 in 2008–2009** (a growth of 347%).
- Visits to the **Web site jumped from 83,054 in 2007–2008 to 315,366 in 2008–2009** (280% more); and from 660,128 page views to 1,480,871 (a 124% increase).
- From August 2009–April 2010, **more than 900 journalists participated in online courses**, putting the Knight Center on track to top the number of journalists trained the previous year.