

'I get it! In plain English if there's a story there's a pattern and if there's a pattern there's data and if there's data there's a story and that's the virtuous circle...that's what keeps the whole thing together!'

*OpenMediaDesk participant  
the light-bulb moment  
autumn 2018*

## **CommonGround** | Ontario's libraries and the future of civil society

Public libraries as repositories of our collected wisdom are foursquare in the Ontario's crucial conversations: Ontarians speak of 'immigration,' 'diversity', 'the solitudes,' 'future of Canada,' and other code words but what's really at stake in these conversations is understanding the connections holding the fragile democratic experiment together: **social cohesion**.

If we don't understand and share workable beliefs about what holds us together, however will Ontarians keep the democratic experiment together, meaning: how will we continue to see 'the other' in ourselves, to listen productively, if at all? Is such a conversation even possible in the age of 'fake news' and toxic media—social or otherwise—crucial though it is?

Citizen disengagement is rampant; voter turnout rates in Canada are amongst the lowest in the world. Citizenship itself feels outmoded. Yet for all the disengagement there is tremendous heat and anger, anger due in no small part to the massification of media: the average person looks at their world and feels adrift, with precious little influence on events. They feel aren't part of the crucial conversations.

Anger is easy; the hard question for libraries isn't about circulation, important though that number is but rather: how do libraries best help the solitudes connect? What benchmarks would we need to understand what success at growing social cohesion looks like?

Not facts. Facts, critical though they are to any debate, alone won't renew democracy.

Facts don't change minds.

Hearts change minds—and shared stories change hearts.

What if the way out of the box of angst and anger wasn't about facts at all but rather what and how and why we feel when we connect—our shared stories?

Isn't that closer to the notion of cohesion?

What if there were a small, inexpensive experiment in a new kind of digital/live crucial conversation, a kind of distributed townhall, all across Ontario, a town hall that never stops—and lives and breathes in your local library?

That might be a crucial conversation indeed.

*meaning and purpose (1) | meaning*

The uber-trendy SXSW ('south by southwest') 2019 conference—where cutting-edge digital folk meet and greet—has declared the next big thing is preserving and supporting libraries and museums and public art galleries as **community assets critical to the future of democracy**.

<https://schedule.sxsw.com/2019/events/PP101165> (the speak)

[https://www.amazon.ca/Palaces-People-Infrastructure-Inequality-Polarization/dp/1524761168/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?](https://www.amazon.ca/Palaces-People-Infrastructure-Inequality-Polarization/dp/1524761168/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=eric+klinenberg&qid=1552328729&s=books&sr=1-1)

[keywords=eric+klinenberg&qid=1552328729&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/civil-society-library.html) (the book: already a NYTimes best-seller by NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg, who wrote the much-quoted NYTimes piece on libraries and civil society <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/civil-society-library.html>)

Why this sudden interest? Because libraries and museums and public art galleries are the shared public spaces—'the commons'—where the renewal of democracy is already underway. This despite political polarization, toxic social media, and a sense that increasingly nobody's capable of listening to a differing point of view.

We learned much about Ontario's libraries burgeoning role as 'the last commons' from the OpenMediaDesk (OMD) project and its transformation of library advocacy storytelling and the remaking of library/community dialogue.

So how best to build on OMD's success?

What if we turn the way community news is made and distributed inside out, thus reimagining libraries as the focus-point of the struggle to seek out the common ground amongst us all—

(1) a place where communities can identify where things could be better (*the news, straight from those most involved*) and

(2) act on the promise to find common ground with those who have a different response to their expressed cause (*the space where communities co-create value*).

*meaning and purpose* (2) | **purpose**

CommonGround's purpose, via public libraries, is mediating getting hard stuff done by the people closest to the problem(s) who want to take the risk of making a difference—who want to try to get stuff right. These folks may not know it but they're nascent leaders.

Example: want to know what homelessness is like? Don't ask a sociology grad student—ask a homeless person their 'why?'

That's the model for CommonGround participants. But what about the libraries? What's *their* role, *their* 'why?'

Under the hood, CommonGround is a simple media process which empowers those few who step forward to participate to discover their hidden **Leadership** skills, to take their cause to their community to try to get action for their cause: to incite people to actually do something about improving their community.

The beating heart of the CommonGround process? ←

It's the notion that leadership is first and foremost about passion...that which changes belief. We hardly ever 'change our minds'—but our hearts...that's a different story.

CommonGround builds on the immense social capital of trust public

libraries have banked in the communities they serve all across Ontario, from Cornwall to Windsor, Toronto to Cochrane and Rainy River.

Upshot? As any leader knows, the ability to induce passion is critical to change: the ability to share this emotion and to inspire change is the ineffable essence (you can't buy it and you can't bottle it) of leadership itself.

Granted, leadership is not for everybody: for every ten of our better angels, there's a jerk mouthing off at the far end of the bar. That's life.

For **CommonGround** to work, all we need is one story a week, across the province, that has real impact. The arithmetic's in our favour: the FOPL system is already OMD-indoctrinated. We need one story/week from over 400 library storytelling prospects to succeed. That's 50 great community stories per year, from all over Ontario, datelined ***your public library***.

Strong odds: so how does this work?

*objective*

To assemble and implement

*phase 1/2019*

a 'below the radar' distributed newsroom operating as a non-partisan non-profit using licenced media analytics/news production platform, COMMONGROUND, owned and developed by Iceboxlogic, out of a community-trusted network of FOPL-member public libraries.

Point of contact: the COMMONGROUND app, in prototype.

COMMONGROUND presents two opposing first-person views of a community issue, in video, on your smartpone, which commits participants to a public appearance at their public library to discuss the issue, under

rules agreed to **before** their participation.

Participation means COMMONGROUND participants win awareness of their issue and points of view via promotion across FOPL member library social media: a Thunder Bay issue can 'have legs' in Hamilton...and we film the live COMMONGROUND sessions in the library: a 'virtuous circle' of community engagement, social action, and democratization in the age of 'fake news'

### *rationale*

At present, there is no 'news layer' replacing the lost coverage and local POV in the cannibalization of small-town newspapers—and their deaths, outright, via digital disruption.

A mobile-phone-based video news service, non-partisan in intent and in execution, at first incubated and then formally rolled out via five (5) media-savvy, OMD-indoctrinated FOPL-member public libraries, would revive this community service and, not to put too fine an edge on it, revive local democracy, voter participation and create/mediate the data informing public policy initiatives.

That news service is FOPL's **CommonGround**: backgrounder on the power of local journalism to undermine 'fake news':

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2018/12/3/1816848/-Open-thread-for-night-owls-Undermining-the-regime-s-fake-news-narrative-with-local-journalism>

*how does CommonGround manage risk, trolling and 'crowd control' in the real world of local issue politics?*

1. Access to library social media networks—in many public library locations in Ontario, the largest local social network—is granted **if and only if** you commit to and obey the CommonGroundRules
  - acceptable demeanour, language and manners
  - respectful deportment in addressing 'the other side'
  - a commitment—shared—to resolve the issue by launching a public process in public at the public library

- public process, in public, at the public library
- this process is governed by rules of order conveyed to participants via a series of videos, the CommonGround curriculum, each of which is stage-gated, by continuing agreement: you cannot proceed to the next stage of the curriculum without building trust with all concerned
    - these 'rules of order' are predicated on the simple agreements participants make in order to sustain a workable improvisational comedy session
    - further, the curriculum is supported by a conversational app interface on the participant's smartphone. If the participant-candidate doesn't have a smartphone, s/he can access CommonGround at the public library's free desktop computer terminals online.
    - **the curriculum is taught by working improv comedians, sharing the rules and guidance for a win-win-win outcome.** There is a province-wide network of improv comedians, who will be tapped and recruited as onsite trainers in participating FOPL member library makerspaces or community access rooms.
2. All public interactions onsite at the library are videoed and will be posted to library social media. This means no one appears under a pseudonym (as in online chat/comments sections) and each and every participant—whether lead advocate or supporter—is responsible for his/her own behaviour. Transparency breeds accountability.
  3. All participants are automatically candidates for financial reward via direct (we don't touch the funds) subventions online via LaterPay, a kind of tithe to their cause.
    - This direct crowdfunding of worthy cause/person has no minimums.
    - Upshot? **CommonGround has a game layer.** If you can navigate all the trust stage-gate hurdles, make a compelling video, comport yourself well and represent your POV convincingly in the room at the live event, and demonstrate a reasonable prospect for success, both personally and for your community, then you **can raise funds** for your cause.
  4. CommonGround is in essence a three-act play
    - *act one*: declare yourself, your issue, and make public your

issue via your video and commitment to advance your issue in a live event at the public library, all the while continuing to commit and uphold the CommonGroundRules

- *act two*: you appear at the live event with your CommonGround opposite number. The event is filmed; if there's a resolution, great! If not, both sides commit to next steps and further accountability. A new CommonGround event may be committed to, in which case, the cycle renews. **Every step of the process is transparent and subject to CommonGroundRules**
- *act three*: The video of the event is posted to library social media; orthodox media may further publicize the issue. Compelling activist/participants are eligible for crowdfunding via an arm's-length independent transaction app/engine for their cause. (ex: LaterPay app).
- ..and CommonGround continues to follow the cause and its resolution on library social media (more news!), likely with orthodox media coverage in parallel
- This process will grow library profile, raise social media reach and generate news interest in library/community outreach on a weekly basis

### *takeaway*

In the era of 'fake news', a peer-to-peer news service, to professional standards of both reportage and production, would negate political polarization, not least because folks in small communities have to live with one another: there's no sanctuary online or in large numbers—in small towns, people know who you are...and whom they will and will not trust.

NB: There are no 'reporters' as such—no 'stand-ups' to camera. local storytellers recruit themselves via the CommonGround public library webpage as on-camera storytellers (first person, eyewitnesses) who are then trained via twinfish\_OMD (Howley)-trained library staff to produce microvideo 'newsbreaks'

These 'newsbreaks' are unmediated, first-person testimonies, recorded on smartphone cameras and uploaded to FOPL-OMD\_CommonGround

repository/server for editing (if required)

and

syndication via FOPL\_OMD social media networks **both locally and across the entire FOPL\_OMD network via FOPL\_OMD member library social media channels [YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram]**

NB: We already are collecting social media data from these networks for FOPL\_OMD\_Library Digital Impact Index: now to harvest LDII/FOPL\_OMD generated hyperlocal 'newsclips' data for policy insights, local political intelligence, and sheer great local storytelling

The work product? 'Netflix does the news': a weekly digital gallery/digest of video story thumbnails/summaries/reader reviews drawn from the entire network, together with daily 'hot headlines' from individual libraries.

**These stories are the genesis of the improv-mediated public conversations participants contract to participate in under CommonGroundRules.**

### **funding**

Funding is required to design, test, build and deploy an OMD platform to capture, edit, produce, package and syndicate microvideo content on a data-mediated app for all smartphones.

### **INSIGHT:**

You get your local news on your phone at work, in the café, in the hallways at school—via the trusted source of your local library, expressed peer-to-peer, by those keen to open their cause to their community

### **PROCESS:**

A pilot/'pro best practices' OMD incubator will identify first-tier talent and launch them into first phase of story

experimentation/quality assurance. These 'best practices' will be taught by expert improv comedians/Howley via Zoom classes, identical to OMD sessions.

Howley has identified and recruited a network of improv comedians local to test libraries. Why improv comedians?

**Because improvisational comedy is all about listening and 'holding the space' for the other person, in an atmosphere of risk, support and 'instant insights': learning to collaborate and cooperate 'on the fly.'**

*inhouse library staff media training*

Improv staff/Howley train handpicked FOPL\_OMD indoctrinated staff are taught, hands-on, the basics of video news story structure, generating question-sets, professional objectivity, interview subject relationship skills, story 'pitching' skills and more. Together with online **CommonGround** video curriculum, this amplifies the media savvy already in place from the OMD sessions.

**BENEFIT:** Library staff will learn the rudiments of effective video production for **all** library video work, not just **CommonGround**. This stands to change the culture of library advocacy/community dialogue communications to the good and to aggressively grow library social media networks as local library video channels win attention.

In the room, at the time of the actual live event, **CommonGround process will be moderated by CommonGround-trained improv facilitator** not library staff: all CommonGround events are standalone and require no library staff oversight.

**budget** | draft only

**NB: ongoing FOPL\_OMD newsletter production and LDII reporting, together with regular updates of the eOMD app are included in this budget.**

Sept 2019-Dec 2019: 90 days for the pilot incubator for three 'pilot libraries,' commencing Sept 15 2019, @\$22,500. **No public media: pure trialling of process/media production offline.**

January 2020 - June 2020 Pilot cost overall for 10 'starter libraries' @\$42,000 for first six months. First 90 days, invitation-only public trial: closed social media only. Second 90 days, invitation public trial with invitation-only public social media.

Trial run for second 90 days (April/May/June) of full-on production for limited test audience, off password-protected site, to fine tune improv-led media training to professional standards and begin to implement social media analytics/Library Digital Impact Index and sentiment/insight data intelligence ("what are they thinking and talking about?")

June 2020 - December 2020. Second six months, FOPL-system wide, @\$54,000.

### *distribution network*

Central CommonGround editing hub (Howley) backstops quality/moderation standards and 'turns' this footage to >2mins, packages and uploads to repository for syndication across all FOPL\_OMD libraries via social media and **all** FOPL libraries via weekly Newsroom Newsletter.

Strategic partners: Thomson-Reuters, Canadian Media Guild, CBC, *Globe and Mail*, regional newspapers (*KW Record*, *London Free Press*, *Windsor Star*, *Hamilton Spectator*, *Ottawa Citizen*)

### Phase 2 | July 2020 onwards

The community data insights derived from the interplay around the emerging CommonGround 'newsbreaks' are extremely valuable. These insights will be anonymized and will form the basis for 'smart city' open community data repositories available to all library

open community data repositories, available to all library cardholders as a new library service offering: **CommonGround** data intelligence, ranging from library service delivery and programming intelligence to local cultural destinations data to emerging public policy issues: 'taking the pulse of the community we serve' by listening to the stories the community is telling through the library.

### **what success looks like**

FOPL\_OMD **CommonGround** is a news 'story engine' which generates community stories which in turn incite social media interactivity. That interactivity, properly codified, contextualized and packaged, is extremely valuable intelligence regarding community sentiment/beliefs/political and social attitudes.

Libraries are already dedicated to bolstering community prosperity, for, by and with the community itself, on a non-profit basis, inclusively and without exception. In the age of 'surveillance capitalism', libraries are the ideal repositories for community data, as a community-held open asset.

Bottom line? **Common Ground** is province-wide open-data, open media initiative which, building on the successes of the OpenMediaDesk project, stands to

- (a) reinvigorate local democracy via a library-mediated community dialogue process/open local data and
- (b) enhance the perception that libraries are not merely a resource for community thought leaders but **thought leaders in and of themselves** who care passionately for local quality of life and prosperity.

