

# Growing Social Impact in a Networked World



Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of participating in the [GEO / Monitor Institute](#) conference, "[Growing Social Impact in a Networked World.](#)" This was a gathering of philanthropic foundations who are interested in networks: what they mean to their work and how best they can leverage them.

This meeting was the culmination of a process that started about four years ago with the [Packard Foundation](#)'s first explorations into networks and with the establishment of a formal community of practice for "network funders" two years later, instigated by the [Hawaii Community Foundation](#).

I had the good fortune of being exposed to this community very early on, as I was involved with one of Packard's early experiments in funding network capacity building. [Diana Searce](#), a consultant at the Monitor Institute, who's been driving this effort from the beginning, has continued to pull me into their world over the years.

It's been amazing to see how far this group has progressed

over the years. Foundations move notoriously slowly, and I had very low expectations after my first few interactions with this group. However, at the [convening last April](#), I noticed a huge leap forward in the collective understanding of the group. Several people were doing cutting edge work, and I was hungry to learn from them.

Still, I have to admit that I had low expectations for this gathering. I had just spent two days at the [Code for America Summit](#) with passionate innovators and doers. I knew that this meeting was going to be much larger than usual, and I was worried about how that would affect the tenor of the conversations. I didn't want to spend two days with a bunch of program officers who didn't know what a network was.

Once again, I was stunned by how far this group has come. I loved listening to some of the veterans in the group talk. In a few short years, they've become leading-edge thinkers in the entire field of networks, not just networks and philanthropy. I was consistently stumped by the questions and challenges raised, and I found myself reconsidering some of my own frameworks for how I think about networks.

The conference was well documented, thanks to an active Twitter feed ([#netfunders](#)) and [Beth Kanter](#)'s heroic herding of a bunch of [guest bloggers](#), myself included. Here are some of my quick takeaways:

- [Wikimedia Foundation](#) Executive Director [Sue Gardner](#) and I led a few breakout groups on the [Wikimedia open strategy process](#). Discussion was feisty, and it was fun talking about the project with Sue now that we've had a year to see the plan in action. Several people blogged about our discussion, including [Paul Connolly](#), [Anna Muoio](#), and [Carole Martin](#). (I put my [intro slides](#) up on Slideshare.)
- I wrote a guest blog for Beth entitled, "[The Elephant in the Room: 'Funders' and Power.](#)" I especially enjoyed

posts from [Stephen Downs](#) and [Sande Smith](#). I was also moved by Mary Manuel's [first foray into social media](#). It takes courage to put yourself out there like that, and the first step is always the hardest. Folks, post a note of encouragement on [Mary's post](#), and for the rest of you who are still wary of taking that first step, be inspired!

- [June Holley](#) noted the sad irony that consultants who do network-oriented work (like us) are not themselves very networked. She's cooking something up to change that. If you're in this space and want in, let her know!
- As far as this community has come, I still want to see more action. My partner-in-crime, [Kristin Cobble](#), always says that learning hasn't truly happened until it's embodied in action. You can't learn to play a violin from reading a book or by listening to [Joshua Bell](#) expound on the topic. There were a lot of hard, unanswered questions at the end of the day, and they will remain unanswered unless more foundations start practicing this stuff.
- I am constantly inspired by the work and words of [Bill Traynor](#), who constantly reminds us that ultimately, the real challenge to all of this work is creating spaces that bring a smile to people's faces when they first walk in. He and Frankie Blackburn are in the process of cooking up the next best thing to move this space forward. Bill and Frankie, please sign me up!

There's always great content at these gatherings, but my greatest learnings about networks always comes from watching Diana Scarce in action. She knows the content as well as anyone, but what sets her apart is her ability to put it into practice. I love watching her create space, I love being in that space, and I'm constantly studying what she does so that I can apply it to my own practice. I really love the people in this community, and that's a testament both to their warmth and passion and also to Diana's network weaving abilities.