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Mark Szymanski  
*Pacific University*

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## The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Clear Motives

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# The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Clear Motives

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By **Mark Szymanski** <marks@pacificu.edu>

This is the last in a four part series on funding sources to help bridge the digital divide. In previous articles I have: described the state of the digital divide (1); detailed a government funding initiative that helps build community technology centers (2); and discussed AOL Time Warner's effort to bridge the digital divide (3). In this final part of the four part series I'd like to reflect on the series and highlight a philanthropic funding source, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (4).

As a result of writing this series I learned that there is a wide spread network of organizations that have committed a large amount of money to help bridge the digital divide. This broad span of efforts is well documented on the Digital Divide Network web site (5). The organizations that have committed some portion of their resources to this issue represent government, private industry, and philanthropic organizations. These bodies all have their own stated and unstated reasons for committing resources to bridge the digital divide, and typically the types of programs they support reflect the values or stated mission of the organization.

As I have been researching these funding sources I have speculated on motive and wondered about the importance of motive since the funding sources represent different types of organizations. With regard to funding sources to bridge the digital divide, a pragmatist might easily set aside motive as irrelevant. And when the organizations that benefit are the most needy, it becomes easy to ignore motive. But, the question still remains and should not be ignored.

What is the motive of the government for funding solutions to bridge the digital divide? The most obvious answer is that it is the job of the government to support the healthy development of the country. We also know that government policies are driven by the philosophical foundation of the party in charge. In politics this is considered the modus operandi. Why else would there be such an effort to win political office? The community technology centers (6) and the block grant programs that support them grew rapidly in an era of moving management of community-based programs out of government hands and into community stake holders hands. In the 1980's this

was driven by the Reagan Republican era desire to decrease the size of “big government”. So, in the government’s case, motive is driven by a basic responsibility but spun by the values of the party in charge.

What is the motive for corporate funding solutions to the digital divide? This question becomes more relevant when the resources that are being offered as a foundation for the bridge are constructed of the very products corporations sell. Should AOL Time Warner serve up AOL products and subscriptions in some of their programs designed to help bridge the digital divide? They might argue that they are providing a quality product and service that they know best. Is one dimension of their motive to familiarize potential consumers with their product and then offer them a discounted subscription fee and commit them to a contract of service? They aren’t offering a free year of MSN or Juno in their programs to bridge the digital divide. Their marketing strategy is based on getting customers to commit to a subscription over time. This is a foundational element of the software industry. Does Microsoft provide Apple computers to schools and organizations in its effort to bridge the digital divide? No. Not unless they are running a Windows operating system. Does Apple offer a Windows based platform to schools and communities it is donating computers to? No.

So one can speculate that in a number of programs in which a corporation gives it’s products away, they are hoping to create a future customer. Here the pragmatist might simply be happy with any product that helps bridge the digital divide. The educator or community leader who is unhappy with a marketing strategy veiled in motive to help is put into a difficult position.

In the final part of this four part series I’d like to highlight a funding source whose motive is rarely questioned, philanthropic sources. Philanthropic organizations motives comes from the definition of philanthropic: the effort to increase the well being of mankind. As a result, philanthropic organizations often have very clear mission statements since profit and political party loyalty are not a part of the equation.

A major player in the philanthropic arena is the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) (7). Their primary mission is “to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.” (7). It is these vulnerable children and families that peer over the vast expanse of the digital divide.

The foundation targets projects for improving major systems serving disadvantaged children and families; transforming neighborhoods; and promoting accountability and innovation. For each one of these goals, the foundation supports a number of projects. Specifically the AECF is “invested in innovative policy and practice initiatives that address the related challenges of strengthening distressed neighborhoods, alleviating family poverty, reconnecting fathers and families, providing better health care, and preventing community violence.” (8).

One way the AECF helps neighborhoods and families is through the development of technology assistance resource centers (9). These centers connect communities to people, information,

tools, and skill building opportunities. As we know, a large amount of this connecting happens over the internet. Government agencies and businesses are rapidly turning to web-based services. So, these centers are a targeted way to provide people with the connections that will help them rebuild their families and neighborhoods.

One of the most powerful and unique elements of the AECF's effort to bridge the digital divide is the Kids Count Project. This is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the U.S. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being (10). In their words "the Kids Count project is the Foundation's efforts to increase public awareness of the condition of children and to foster greater public accountability from improving child outcomes. A national and state-by-state effort to track the educational, economic, social, and physical well-being of children in the United States, Kids Count seeks to enrich public discussions about the most promising ways to help children grow up to be healthy, productive adults." (10).

The Kids Count project offers a pdf (10) that is a very comprehensive demographic picture of the digital divide in the United States. They also offer other data-based resources that are web accessible. These resources would certainly help any organization describe a data driven need when writing a grant.

In the end, Annie E. Casey Foundation's commitment is clear and it's efforts are targeted. They are committed to developing solutions for long-term issues that have plagued families and neighborhoods over time. They are also representative of the kind of efforts that are needed to decrease the digital divide. They understand that strong families and safe and vital neighborhoods are the cornerstone of hope, motives aside.

#### References:

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