

Alberto Iburgüen, the Knight Foundation, and the future of change **The Knight Foundation's Alberto Iburgüen is on a mission -- to build communities, nourish the arts, spur innovation, and save American journalism**



e's financed poems on biodegradable paper and vegetable ink dropped from a helicopter on a Miami concert crowd. He gave about \$10,000 to convert a closed putt-putt course into a temporary sculpture park. He's also contributed \$30 million in Knight money to help keep the impressive collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts in town. And he spent another \$30 million to create the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University.

That's the job of Alberto Iburgüen, age 74, chief executive of the Miami-based John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, with more than \$2 billion in assets, giving away \$120 million or so each year to support journalism and the 26 communities once served by newspapers owned by the Knight brothers. For this, he's paid \$794,889 in base salary and another \$90,557 in benefits, according to the foundation's financial statements.

His imprint has been astounding. One example: After he quit as publisher of the Miami Herald in 2005 to lead the foundation, he decided Knight could make a profound impact on Miami by investing in the arts. That has meant more than \$165 million committed to Miami arts groups, including \$37 million in grants announced last month -- everything from \$3 million for the Miami

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Written by John Dorschner, BT Contributor; Cover and Spread Photos by Silvia Ros
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City Ballet to \$150,000 to create a play based on the writings of Little Haiti novelist Edwidge Danticat.

He's also invested many millions more to foster an atmosphere for a new generation of tech entrepreneurs in Miami -- an ambition shared by many cities throughout the country in the quest to become the next Silicon Valley.

From a national perspective, Knight's largest impact focuses on bolstering America's news operations at this crucial, historic moment -- under severe attack by the "fake news" allegations of Donald Trump and friends while many entities, particularly regional newspapers and local TV news, struggle with dismal financials.

The major news in this article is that Knight is about to partner with others to make huge investments to bolster local news on the web throughout the United States. Details of those projects could be announced in February.

But he has a lot more to say -- about how most Americans are losing faith in the media, how high schoolers get more of their news from YouTube than from television, why he felt a growing disillusion with Knight Ridder before he left the *Herald*, how a blossoming arts scene can transform a community, and why he feels the foundation might change direction in the future.

His office scheduled an hour for the interview several weeks in advance. When the day came, he was sick. Rather than cancel, he asked *Biscayne Times* to come to his apartment overlooking Biscayne Bay. He ended up talking for three hours.

Disclosure: I was a staff writer at the *Herald* during Ibarguen's time there. In 2007, the Knight Foundation paid me to do a report on its activities in Ohio.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and readability, and the sequence of some questions and answers has been rearranged for continuity.



iscayne Times: A Knight-sponsored Gallup poll recently showed that 69 percent of Americans say they have a declining trust in the media in the past decade. For Republicans, it's 94 percent, independents 75 percent. Is this the media's fault, or society's?

I think it's clearly a problem with society. When the institutions that we have trusted since the founding of the republic -- churches, certain governments and professions of one sort or another -- are all not believed.

But consider: the military and libraries are trusted. Why? I guess to some extent it's ubiquity. To some extent it's their nonpartisan aspect. Perhaps it's that anyone consistently always has been able to access them. That they clearly provide a service that they said they would. But I guess mainly it's that they have always stayed away from politics to some extent.

When you and I were younger, the military was clearly not trusted during the Vietnam era. I think frankly the way the military has conducted itself since -- men like Colin Powell -- are significantly responsible for the kind of re-igniting faith in the military.

As for libraries, we conducted a poll when Miami-Dade government was planning to cut I think it was 30 percent of the budget for libraries. Two-thirds of respondents wanted to preserve library funding without cuts, either by increasing property tax or by cutting other county services. So for a huge majority of Americans, it's a service that is appreciated.

So is it the media's or society's fault? I think the answer is yes. As media, we are absolutely part of what's happening in society -- and reflect it. I think media -- you can't count the number of mistakes in media when you think back on it, with the benefit of hindsight.

But this drop in readership of newspapers where you and I used to work began not with the internet, not with cable, but it began when women started to leave the house in the '60s to go to work, and that meant there was no one at home to receive that paper, and people stopped taking it.

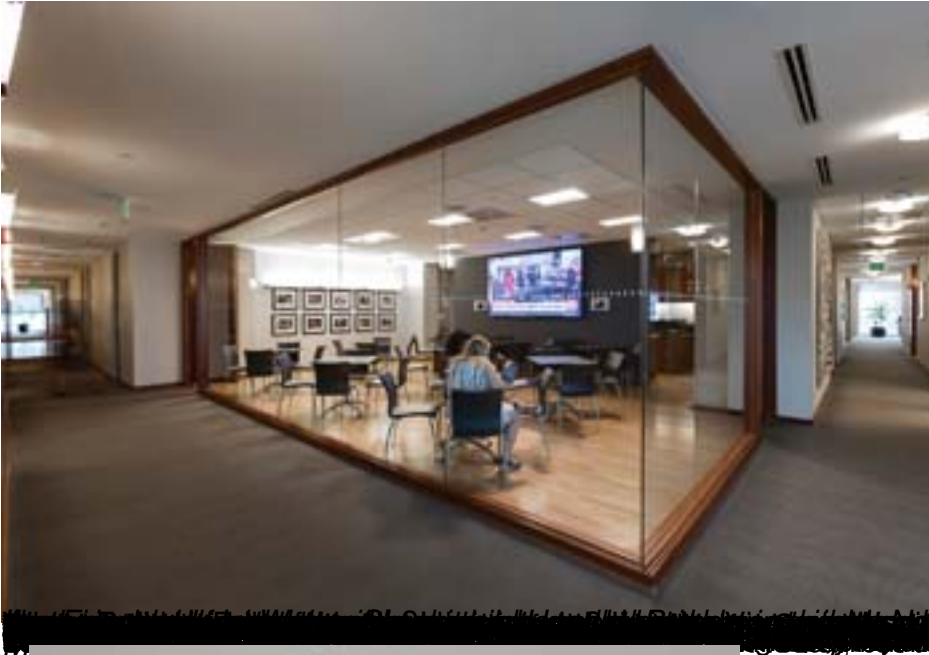
So there's been a drop since then, slow at first, but nevertheless the numbers I would see at *Newsday* when I was there in the late '80s and '90s, it was a significant concern for the business.

Then you had the rise of cable television. Many cable news shows are opinion treated as news. Their role and mission is to convince you of a point of view, not to tell you what happened.

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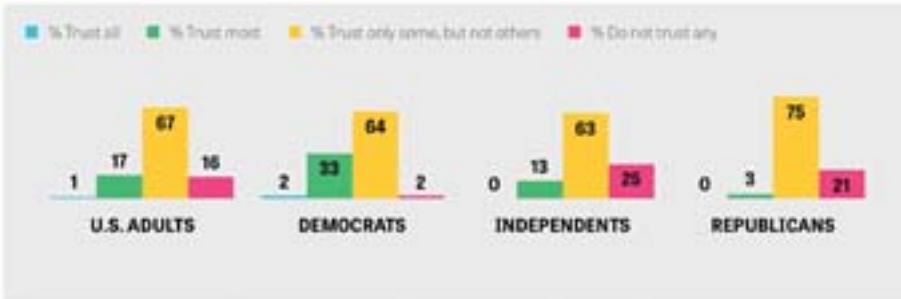
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