REPORTING URBAN LIFE IN THE CENTURY OF THE CITY

The Future of Journalism: Part 1

Lido di Jesolo, Italy

Bengaluru, India
We are living in the century of the city. Each year, 60 million people move to urban areas, and the biggest cities of tomorrow have yet to be built today. At the same time, the thousands of cities that already exist are facing unprecedented physical, social, and economic challenges.

In recognition of these profound changes, in 2013 The Rockefeller Foundation, approaching its centennial and looking at the trends that would define the next 100 years, launched 100 Resilient Cities. This groundbreaking initiative created a network of 100 cities globally that would receive support as they wrestled with their new realities.

But in doing this, the Foundation identified another trend: a dearth of regular coverage of urban policy, trends, creativity, and innovation in the mainstream media. We all know the data: by 2050, 75% of the world’s population will live in cities. Yet the role of cities in modern life, the challenges they are facing now and will face in the future, and the incredible innovation already underway to make them more equitable and resilient places, was largely overlooked. The Foundation thus sought a partner who shared its interest in deepening global reporting on urban issues.

Enter The Guardian, which saw a fascinating editorial opportunity in the chance to look in greater depth at the many issues impacting cities across the world. Through the creation of a thoughtful hub for discussion and sharing of ideas about the future of cities, it saw a meaningful opportunity to reach broader audiences and deepen their relationship with readers. With a reach of more than 150 million readers every month, and a driving mission to help people make sense of the modern and too-often unequal world, The Guardian was uniquely suited to partner with the Foundation to produce frequent and editorially independent coverage of cities across the globe.

So began a three-year partnership that allowed The Guardian to ramp up its coverage of an array of core topics—from the environment and transport, to inequality and urban renewal—and present it through the lens of cities. This content is brought together under a specific “Cities” banner to highlight the relevance of the topic, while using investigative journalism, data visualization, storytelling, citizen journalism, filmmaking, social media, and audience engagement to highlight the complexity and vibrancy of cities.

Figure 1
Monthly Pageviews on Guardian Cities

Year-on-year traffic growth on the Guardian Cities website shows high interest in the topics of urbanization and cities.
The Rockefeller Foundation’s funding is acknowledged on the page, yet all editorial planning and decisions remain entirely independent and firmly with The Guardian—both to uphold the principles of independent journalism, and to ensure that the platform is a trusted and credible source of news and analysis.

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Now, almost three years later, the results of this partnership are clear. First, there are the raw numbers. Since Guardian Cities launched in January 2014, more than 36 million unique browsers have visited the site, and it has had over 75 million page views. And the trend is firmly in the right direction: in 2014 the site achieved an average of 1.5 million page views every month, and 2015 saw an average of 2.6 million—67% growth. That number has continued to increase, along with the Guardian Cities Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram followings.

Beyond the numbers, the partnership has also allowed The Guardian to pursue different types of journalism, including a more “solutions”-focused style of reporting. It has also enabled their journalists to dig much deeper into stories than the constraints of a deadline-driven newsroom might usually allow. This has resulted in in-depth explorations of the many issues facing cities, such as resilience against natural disasters and the impact of gentrification. It has also allowed the team to run two innovative, long-running series, the nature of which The Guardian would not have had the resources to pursue before. The Story of Cities, which charted the ancient historical roots of cities from Baghdad to Benin in a 50-part series, brought a deep and thoughtful historical perspective to coverage of cities across the world, giving readers a more rounded understanding of contemporary cities than more traditional journalism would convey. In the same vein, earlier this year the team ran a hugely ambitious History of Cities in 50 Buildings series over 50 days. This was launched with a report on the 4,600-year-old pyramid of Zoser, and was followed by articles on everything from Syria’s war-torn Citadel of Aleppo to the very first Starbucks coffeehouse. The series was designed to be educational, historical, architectural, and social—and had a clear mission to stretch readers’ understanding of the planet’s rapid urbanization.

As the site goes from strength to strength, so does the partnership between The Rockefeller Foundation and The Guardian, with additional projects now underway. The mutual trust that has grown between our two institutions has allowed us to explore new ways of collaborating. One of the unique elements of the Foundation’s grantmaking model is that they are constantly on the lookout globally for new trends—or, more to the point, problems that stand a good chance of being solved if philanthropic capital can reach them in time. Appreciating that journalists often see trends or have insights before others, the Foundation has provided The Guardian with support to bring far-flung foreign correspondents, reporters,

Rachel White is Executive Vice President, Philanthropic and Strategic Partnerships at The Guardian. Based in Washington D.C., Rachel joined The Guardian in 2014 to lead philanthropic and strategic partnerships. Prior to joining The Guardian, she served as executive vice president and interim president of the D.C.-based, journalism-centered think tank New America Foundation. Working across media, policy, government, the private sector, and philanthropy, she led the organization in advancing new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States, and launched New America NYC and New America Live. From 1995 to 2005, Rachel worked for World Wildlife Fund, where she launched programs in San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Houston, and played a central and lead role on the Living Planet Campaign.

Carey Meyers is an Associate Director of Communications at The Rockefeller Foundation. Carey is responsible for strategic communications focused on the Foundation’s resilience portfolio, including its food security and health initiatives. She also guides communications planning in the Foundation’s Africa and Asia regional offices. Prior to joining The Rockefeller Foundation, she worked in global health and development programs and research, as well as in communications roles.