



Catching Up With Craig: How a Tech Donor Is Supporting Democracy, Media and More

Ade Adeniji | February 11, 2021



CRAIGSLIST FOUNDER CRAIG NEWMARK PHOTO CREDIT: BLEACHER + EVERARD

Craigslist, the long-running classifieds website launched back in 1995, has largely looked the same through the years, with tried-and-true sections devoted to jobs, housing, for sale, gigs, missed connections, and plenty more. The site still attracts a whopping 50 billion pageviews a month and could be raking in \$1 billion annually, per one [consulting group's](#) 2018 estimate. The tech billionaire behind Craigslist, Craig Newmark, promoted lead programmer Jim Buckmaster to the position of CEO in 2000. And wouldn't you know it, Buckmaster is still at the helm today.

Sticking to a trusted formula and leaning on trusted people seems to be the name of the game, here.

Founded in 2015, [Craig Newmark Philanthropies](#) has kept a similarly tight focus, supporting journalism and the information ecosystem, voter protection, women in tech, and veterans and military families. That's not to say Newmark is incapable of branching out.

"I actually have a comedy tutor," he told me in a recent interview, the first time we've caught up with him since 2019. New hobbies aside, the donor has also moved into new philanthropic territory in the past year, giving big toward hunger and food insecurity.

But one reason we were eager to touch base with Newmark now is that some of the familiar issues he's stuck with since embarking on his philanthropy are more relevant than ever. As the tech entrepreneur's giving came of age, the threats of fake news, disinformation and unprecedented challenges to democratic institutions reached a fever pitch, culminating with the January 6 insurrection.

We spoke with Newmark about what guides his philanthropy on these critical issues, the people and organizations that have impressed him the most, and where his giving is headed next. For starters, in his typical matter-of-fact way, Newmark says he's continuing to focus on empowering people of "good will."

Strengthening democracy and voting protection

Newmark says his philanthropy is all about finding effective leaders working in the fields he funds and letting them do their work, an approach that has driven some of his major donations in defense of democracy and elections.

"My theme is to find people who are good at their job in an important area, and then I will share the power that I have, meaning giving away money and influence. Time and resources are best spent by practitioners in an area, people who really know their stuff, and my job is to get out of their way," Newmark explains, echoing other philanthropists focused on backing leaders on the ground.

At the end of 2019, Craig Newmark Philanthropies made a \$5 million gift to the Leadership Conference Education Fund, the 501(c)(3) arm of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, in support of its democracy work, including its voting rights and 2020 census efforts. Newmark is keen on leader Vanita Gupta, a star civil rights attorney, who recently took leave as head of the organizations when she was asked by President Joe Biden to serve as the associate attorney general at the U.S. Department of Justice.

"My high school history and civics teacher, Mr. Schulzki, taught me that everyone has the right to vote and that a strong democracy demands full inclusion and participation of the public. Yet, Americans are discouraged, harassed and even forbidden from exercising this right. That's why the Education Fund's work is so important to protecting our democracy," [Newmark said](#) at the time.

In his support of the Brennan Center for Law at NYU, meanwhile, he's interested not just in their work on voting rights, but also other entwined issues like mass incarceration and redistricting.

Money keeps flowing

Craig Newmark Philanthropies—which includes the Craig Newmark Foundation and Craig Newmark Philanthropic Fund—did a combined \$100 million in grantmaking in 2020. All told, between 2018 and 2020, Craig Newmark Philanthropies has given around \$338.1 million, per [Chronicle of Philanthropy numbers](#).



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In 2020, grantmaking included \$1 million to ProPublica for its Electionland program to boost national and local reporting on voting issues in the 2020 election; \$388,000 to the American Press Institute to build a network connecting newsroom leaders, civic and academic institutions, and others to combat disinformation; and \$350,000 to the Feminist Majority Foundation and Ms. Magazine to form Women Vote2020, a program to engage young voters and expand the magazine's 2020 election coverage.

One somewhat under-the-radar interest of Newmark's is tackling online harassment and hate speech. His \$1 million grant to the Anti-Defamation League for its work to detect, expose and counter online hate speech is a good example of this.

"A lot of people have been deliberately misinformed... My focus is on people who are doing things like better understanding disinformation, where it's coming from, and how to counter and disrupt it," he said. More than just cutting checks, Newmark's knowledge of established and emerging leaders in his issue areas illustrates just how much he's kept his ear to the ground.

Craig Newmark Philanthropies made a \$5 million gift to Stanford Internet Observatory, which recently did a deep dive into [Parler datasets](#). A cross-disciplinary initiative comprising research, teaching and policy engagement, the observatory addresses the abuse of today's information technologies, with a particular focus on social media. A \$1 million Newmark gift to Harvard Kennedy's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy supports [Technology and Social Change Project \(TaSC\)](#), headed up by Joan Donovan, exploring how media manipulation is a means to control public conversation, derail democracy, and disrupt society.

Newmark mentions Kate Starbird at the University of Washington, who does research within the emerging field of crisis informatics—the study of how people use information-communication technologies (ICTs) during crisis events, and examines how people use social media to seek, share and make sense of information after natural disasters and man-made disasters. More recently, Starbird's research has shifted to focus on the spread of disinformation in this context. For all these reasons, Newmark is also a fan of this institution and is supporting the Election Integrity Partnership at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public.

Newmark is still an avid backer of trustworthy journalism, including at CUNY's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. "I grew up kind of weirdly between middle class and above poverty. We never went hungry, but almost did," Newmark says, adding that the public university is an important avenue for helping everyday people, including immigrants, realize the American Dream. Craig Newmark Philanthropies also made a \$2.5 million gift to support aspiring journalism students at Howard University in Fall 2020.

New news

Aside from his newfound interest in comedy (he did try out a few of his jokes during the interview), the pandemic year has nudged Newmark into some new philanthropic arenas. Craig Newmark Philanthropies pledged \$10 million toward hunger and food insecurity back in October, and just committed another \$15 million toward this cause.

This \$25 million will benefit organizations like World Central Kitchen, DC Central Kitchen, FareStart, Feeding America, and God's Love We Deliver. Newmark's longstanding interest in supporting veterans seems to be an entry point to the new issue area, as he's focused on tackling hunger for veterans and their families, as well. Newmark was able to identify initial grantees by linking up with the Bob Woodruff Foundation, a charity that focuses on serving veterans.

"My theme here is the same. I found people good at the job and am giving money and whatever influence I can," Newmark says.

Craig Newmark Philanthropies is taking a three-pronged approach to addressing food insecurity: Full Plate ensures that people have food today because Americans should not go to bed hungry; Full Pantry makes sure people can feed themselves tomorrow by tackling the upstream issues of hunger; And Full Coverage advances a new economic normal in which all Americans are food-secure.

Newmark isn't the first donor to step up during these difficult times. But it's particularly notable coming from a Silicon Valley donor, as local food insecurity has grown during a time of record profits within the sector.

Craig Newmark Philanthropies and Omidyar Network also recently announced a new partnership with Consumer Reports to advance consumer privacy and strengthen data rights in the United States. With additional support from these two organizations, Consumer Reports will work to advance efforts to press for stronger consumer privacy laws and to pioneer new solutions that help consumers take control of their data.

Consumer Reports is just the kind of stalwart organization that Newmark often funds, and as we've [covered](#) previously, he's been backing the 85-year-old organization for a while now. He linked up with Omidyar this time, because, as he puts it, "they have real money."

On this front, Newmark is looking into the future of Internet of Things devices— your smart TV, your Amazon Echo, and the like. "I love TV and watching it," he says, "but I do not love TV watching me."

Consumer Reports and its Digital Lab that Newmark helped stand up, focuses on the data privacy and security issues that consumers face in today's digital era.

Newmark continues to run his charity with minimal help, as he'd prefer his funds go to another nonprofit, rather than hiring a slew of staff. But he has big ambitions for future giving. "My intent is to punch way above my weight, particularly when it comes to voter protection. Our country is supposed to stand for something. And that means people get to vote."

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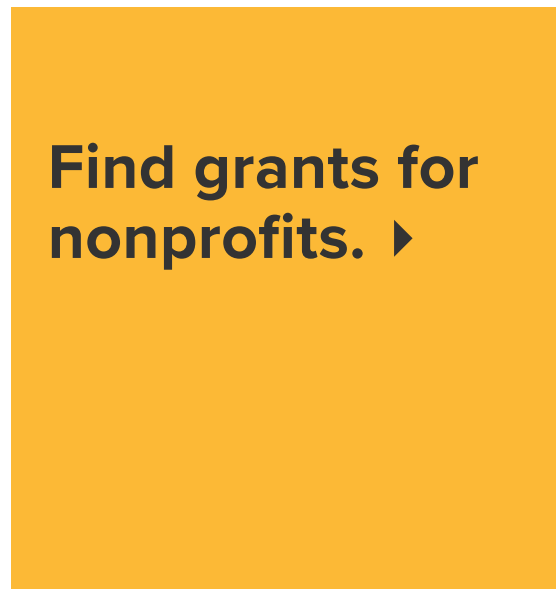
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