

The State Decoded

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
The State Decoded	The Miller Center	A digital platform for parsing and displaying state codes, making laws readable and accessible to the average citizen	\$165,000

Many state codes—the laws that govern every state—have been online for several years. But in most cases, they only exist in inaccessible formats. Many are only available as PDFs, making them difficult to search and interpret for even experienced legal professionals and journalists. The State Decoded aimed to create a standard platform, deployable in every state, to parse the text of a state’s code and build a website where ordinary citizens could quickly access contextualized information about the laws that govern them. The project was led by Waldo Jaquith, a programmer and open government advocate who had developed an early version of The State Decoded for Virginia.

THE INNOVATION

The State Decoded makes laws digitally accessible by providing a set of tools to create individual websites for each state’s code. Prior to The State Decoded receiving Knight News Challenge funding, much of the work of the open government movement had been focused on clarifying the political process of lawmaking, as opposed to making existing laws more readable. By prototyping the creation of state code websites with basic search functionality, embedded legal definitions, and a rich API, The State Decoded represented one of the first major attempts to improve the user experience of citizens who are interested in accessing and understanding current laws.

The ultimate goal of The State Decoded was to change people’s relationships with the laws that govern them by equipping average citizens with information about how their state works, how their government functions, and the laws that impact their daily lives. Achieving that objective would also carry significant benefits for

journalists, giving them a reliable source of information on current laws when researching articles and enhancing the quality of the information media outlets provide about the state code.

IMPLEMENTATION

Development of The State Decoded has largely proceeded as its founder initially envisioned. Building off of pre-Knight News Challenge work, Jaquith and his team launched Virginia Decoded in March 2012. The next step was to rework the Virginia-specific code so it could be applied to other states. That work began with the GitHub release of Version 0.1 of The State Decoded’s source code in May 2012. Subsequent updates to the code were released every one to two months through the end of 2012.

To Jaquith’s surprise, interest in the pre-release software was much higher than he had anticipated. Early contributors to the code on GitHub proved to be valuable development partners, providing a number of suggestions for improvement that were incorporated into later versions by the core team. To accommodate the volume of community feedback, the time between releases increased in 2013 as each code release grew more ambitious. Version 0.6, released in February 2013, established a public API for State Decoded sites and created a standard XHTML format for importing laws. Changes in version 0.7 were more substantive than in all previous versions combined, and consisted of optimizations for speed, efficiency, and navigability. The State Decoded released Version 0.8 in November 2013. Jaquith intends for this to be the final release before it releases version 1.0.

Although the project has largely stuck with its original plan, a few factors have led to slight modifications. Several groups expressed an interest in seeing municipal codes given the same digital treatment as that of states, and later software releases supported that interest. Additionally, an intention to hire a domain expert in the typography of legal texts was scrapped when it became clear that only a few such experts exist, and that their time would have been prohibitively expensive. Instead, the team worked with a designer with experience in typography and absorbed the additional cost of that person learning more about legal texts.

Of The State Decoded's numerous successful partnerships, the strongest is likely its partnership with the OpenGov Foundation, which has led efforts to implement The State Decoded in Maryland, San Francisco, and Baltimore. Other notable partners of The State Decoded include the ReInvent Law Laboratory at the Michigan State University College of Law, which has committed to implementing the State Decoded in Michigan, and the Free Law Project's CourtListener, which gathers court decisions online to support The State Decoded for CourtListener's API.

The project has met its key development goals, and as planned from the start, Jaquith has moved on from the project. But the open source community continues to refine and develop The State Decoded's codebase, and the task of deploying the platform in additional states and municipalities around the country will be left in the hands of motivated and engaged citizens in each community.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

By March 2014, The State Decoded had launched in Virginia, Florida, Maryland, Chicago, San Francisco, Baltimore, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. Stakeholders in Delaware, Louisiana, Michigan, and Washington have also expressed interest in implementing it. Accessing copies of laws for other states has proved more difficult than the team anticipated, as most states do not provide bulk downloads of their

laws. Jaquith's goal was to create a platform that could be applied to all 50 states, spearhead implementation in a select few states, and trust the remainder of the work to volunteer open government groups and citizen activists, with Jaquith serving in a largely advisory capacity. That scenario is exactly what has happened: Jaquith's team has overseen creation of the Virginia and Florida State Decoded sites, with the OpenGov Foundation and other groups managing sites in other areas. In March 2014, the OpenGov Foundation launched americadecoded.org as a central directory for all Decoded sites in the United States.

The team does not track visitors to www.statedecoded.com or any of the individual Decoded sites, as it has prioritized having an API and machine-readable data. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the project has had a profound impact on attitudes about open government. Jaquith has become one of the most recognized players in the open government movement, regularly receiving speaking invitations from think tanks and conferences related to freedom of information. He was named a 2011 White House Champion of Change. In 2013, with further support from the Knight Foundation, he spearheaded the foundation of the US Open Data Institute to encourage collaboration among people, organizations, and businesses working on open data. Additionally, in contrast to three years ago, the open data community widely sees state codes as primary datasets that need to be online, and there is widespread interest in making legal codes machine-readable, understandable to non-attorneys, and automatically integrated with other forms of related legal data. According to members of the open government community, Jaquith and The State Decoded are nearly single-handedly responsible for initiating this culture shift.