



SHOWCASING & ANALYZING MEDIA
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, DEMOCRACY & CIVIL SOCIETY

Digital Media And the Public Sphere

A Future of Public Media project of the
Center for Social Media in the
School of Communication at American University,
with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation

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*Rapporteur's Report
By Barbara Abrash*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Media and the Public Sphere looked at the clashes of cultures and imperatives that arise as new “citizen” media and more established public media try to find connections that serve the public interest. New citizen media are, in some bold experiments, creating strong and vibrant public spaces, the very kind of public spaces that traditional public media has long sought to foster and nurture. At the same time, some public broadcasters are experimenting creatively with more open and participatory environments.

Participants explored opportunities for cooperation between and tensions between these two kinds of media. The group concluded that in many different contexts *active shaping* of media environments is critical to public engagement, as is the *active participation* of members of the public. Linking all the suggestions together was the notion of *an active commitment to the cultivation of public life, through institutions and policies*. The group highlighted activities to act on these conclusions, including *teaching and training* especially in media literacy; identifying successful models for *moderating and curating*; the importance of *alliances within the nonprofit sector*, particularly for developing alternative and sustainable economic models; using new opportunities such as digital channels for *experiments*; and the need for continued and targeted *research*.

PARTICIPANTS

The meeting brought together representatives from public broadcasting, public-oriented and Internet-based projects, policy advocates, foundation representatives and scholars.

Public broadcasting was represented by **Brendan Greeley** (Blogger-in-Chief, PRI's Open Source Radio); **Jacquie Jones** (Executive Director, National Black Programming Consortium); **Debra May Hughes** (CEO, Public Interactive); **David Liroff** (VP and Chief Technology Officer, WGBH) and **Jake Shapiro** (Executive Director, Public Radio Exchange).

Among Internet-based projects, **Zephyr Teachout** (University of Vermont), **Michael Litz** (US Director, OneWorldUS), and metablogger **Rebecca McKinnon** (co-founder, Global Voices) discussed landmark experiments on the Internet. **Drazen Pantic** (Co-Director, Location One) and **Martin Lucas** (Hunter College) spoke about the uses of emergent technologies by artists, activists, and self-organized communities. Approaches to digital media as a tool for mobilizing face-to-face exchange were explored by **Dan Werner** (McNeil/Lehrer Productions) and **Peter Levine** (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement).

The policy and economic environments that both nurture and limit public media were brought into focus by policy experts **Gene Kimmelman** (Director, Consumers Union) and **Mark Cooper** (Director of Research, Consumer Federal of America), and analysts **Susie Lindsay** (Berkman Center for Internet and Society) and **Andrew Nachison** (Director, The Media Center).

Foundations were represented by **Becky Lentz** (Ford Foundation), **Helen Brunner** (Democracy Media Fund), **Karen Menichelli** (Benton Foundation), and **John Detric** (Charles F. Kettering Foundation). Scholars included **Sandra Braman** (University of Minnesota, Milwaukee), **Noelle McAfee** (American University; University of Massachusetts, Lowell), **Patricia Aufderheide** (American University), **Bob Kingston** (Charles F. Kettering Foundation), and **Kathryn Montgomery** (American University).

INTRODUCTION

On January 12-13, 2006, the Center for Social Media at American University and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation hosted a meeting of public broadcasters, digital media practitioners, scholars, funders, analysts and policy specialists. The meeting was part of the Center for Social Media's Future of Public Media project, funded by the Ford Foundation, and is a continuation of the Kettering Foundation's research on the professions and the public.

This was the second convening of the project, which is based on the premise that public media is defined less by its funding sources or government charter than on its mission to serve a democratic public. A main feature of a truly public media is that it engages a public in its democratic work. This definition opens the door for public media to be more than the traditional public broadcasting, public cablecasting and public DBS channels. It can also include new, independent media by nonprofessionals. Emergent digital technologies enable a proliferation of public expression, creation, and distribution of media. Many of these new ventures have a decidedly public spirit.

Group conversation was concerned with "publics" in terms of people in their civic aspects, enabled to engage with others about problems that they share and actions they may pursue, however they may disagree about approaches or solutions. Participants found that the meaning of public media is broad and malleable. It need not be tied to public funding, though it probably should not be driven by profits or commercialization. It need not be limited to the professional spaces of public broadcasting, though there is definitely a need for these professional spaces to continue. As new citizen media productions proliferate and circulate on the Internet and in other ways, those that have a public purpose cannot be excluded from the universe of public media. To the contrary, they should be thought of as part of the ecosystem of media with a public bent.

Public media resources range from taxpayer-supported public broadcasting to university and foundation-supported initiatives to the enthusiasm of volunteer bloggers. These various zones of public media may be affected by their funding models, but share a commitment to creating spaces for public communication, civic discourse, and information to serve the public interest. The common thread is that they are not driven by a profit making agenda.

EXAMPLES OF OPEN-PLATFORM PUBLIC MEDIA

Public Broadcasting

How is public broadcasting seizing the challenge of participatory, citizen media? Among others:

- Boston public radio/TV station **WGBH** is experimenting with new open forms of distribution and access, including archives, podcasts, blogs, and digital distribution. In addition to podcasting and providing on-line resources, the McNeil/Lehrer organization sponsors.

- *By the People*, a project of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, uses new and traditional media at the station level to organize local forums in which small groups talk together to formulate questions of shared concern. These become the basis for a national broadcast.
- The **National Black Programming Consortium**, which has a mandate to provide a platform for civil dialogue, with special focus on African-American communities, created a website for reporting and open discussion on the New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- PRI's **Open Source Radio**—housed at UMass Lowell, located on the WGBH server and syndicated by PRI—is an open site for blogging and conversation that sits at the intersection of radio and the Internet. The profusion of messages that it receives is curated, and serves both to stimulate conversation among its participants, as well as the basis for programming heard via radio and Internet. “This is not a show with a blog, but a blog that results in a show.” Triggering productive audience response and curating conversation is a labor-intensive challenge, as staff members build on traditional professional broadcasting skills in a uncharted territory.
- **Public Radio Exchange (PRX)** is a website that demonstrates how emerging technologies can enrich non-profit radio content by aggregating, curating and organizing audio productions for dissemination on multiple platforms.

What are public broadcasting's assets? With a trusted and familiar brand, a national infrastructure and well-honed professional standards and practices, public broadcasters are well-positioned to serve as sites of public dialogue.

- Trust. The general public regards public broadcasting as a uniquely credible, dependable source of information, and a safe space for discussion across differences of opinion. Open participation creates new opportunity for building credibility.
- National reach. Unlike cable and niche services, public broadcasting is capable of reaching diverse national audiences.
- Local connection. National broadcast reach is achieved through a system of local stations that can serve as hubs for community engagement.

Internet-based

How are Internet-based media projects turning the promise of participation into public engagement? In this noisy, diffuse, and uncontrolled environment, two projects demonstrate ways to engage the public in an open environment:

- In the open and self-aggregating blogosphere, **Global Voices** is a citizen media project that shows how blogging can be shaped into civic conversation globally. This moderated site, based at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University Law School, is designed to seed citizen conversation about issues of concern to people around the world. The site draws upon the work of a stable of volunteers, which is harvested by six regional editors who contribute the most interesting links in their regions to the central site. Global Voices, which seeks to fill a gap in the public conversation, provides

a site for modelling new behaviors of civic discourse in digital environment. While it regards its contributors as “citizen witnesses” rather than journalists, it has become a source for journalists.

- **OneWorld** (oneworld.net) is an online/offline network and portal with 12 centers worldwide, that focuses on human rights and global issues in 11 languages. Its range extends from syndication on Yahoo World News to providing villages with fish market information. To bring together disparate elements, special attention is given to providing a personalized and hospitable home page—allowing for empathetic connection and a safe space for discussion, as well as hard economic and political information. National regulatory requirements sometimes hinder free information flow for this global initiative, which gives special attention to South-North exchange.

What are the advantages of cybermedia for public life?

- Access. They provide a platform that can encourage the making and cultivating of relationships that are accessible to anyone with an internet account.
- Self-generating social networks. They allow networks to form from participation rather than structuring relationships from the top.
- Scaleability. They can start small, grow big, and even possibly grow resources with their growth in numbers.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges

In a media environment that is moving constantly toward greater user choice and control, these exciting experiments in public media, reveal tensions and contradictions:

- Openness v. structure. Open participation can be chaotic. There is a need to structure conversation and to model rules of behavior in new media environments. Professional broadcasters are exploring ways of translating their expertise as they fashion new roles as moderators and curators. Safe spaces in which people can speak freely must be secured in the digital media environment.
- Inclusivity. Despite the openness and accessibility of digital media technologies, there are significant disparities in participation. Blogging sites are dominated by white male voices, and are replete with misinformation and polarized opinion. There is a need for active outreach to ensure inclusion and diversity of voices, and for moderating techniques that effectively recenter polarized discussion.
- Sustainability. In a highly competitive and emerging media environment, sustainability for mission-driven public media depends on foundation and participant support, but also requires engagement with a market-driven economy.

- Policy issues. Experiments like these tend to emerge in the unused spaces of a media ecology still in formation. They lack protection to ensure their longevity and health as public spaces. What are the policies needed to nurture and protect this nascent public space and the citizen participation it engenders?

Opportunities

These projects suggest the many possibilities that emergent technologies provide for re-imagining and restructuring public media:

- Modelling new public behaviors. Participatory digital media has produced both a flood of public expression and the need to shape it in ways that focus and frame diffuse and polarized opinion into coherent civic discourse.
- Invigorating participation. Accessible digital media has stimulated public participation across generational and geographical divides, and provides established and emerging public media sites in which to expand opportunities for distribution and public engagement.
- Convening communities. New platforms encourage the formation of communities around shared interests - locally, nationally and globally, on-line and off-line. The Dean presidential campaign and Moveon.org demonstrate the organizing, as well as convening capabilities of digital technology, and which can produce face-to-face, as well as virtual, connections

Overarching Issues

Models and cultures of public broadcasting

There are fundamental differences between the structures and cultures of public broadcasting and those of the emerging participatory media world. They present problems of compatibility and obstacles to mutually beneficial collaborations.

Public broadcasting—an institution shaped by federal policies, funding models, and habits that support “push” media – must respond to a new, open environment. As the National Black Programming Consortium discovered when it attempted to create a website for reports on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, internal obstacles abound. Even as they attempt to engage in open, uncontrolled cybermedia, public broadcasters are bound by regulatory policies that hold them legally responsible for content.

The exceptional degree of trust that public broadcasting is grounded in resulted from practices, standards and professional skills developed in the context of a top-down, hierarchical, controlled broadcast environment. How can this credibility be maintained, translated, and expanded in porous media spaces that are still under construction?

Problems of inclusion and participation

New media spaces tend to carry forward longstanding patterns of racial and class exclusion, as well as age- and interest-group isolation. Communities of interest that aggregate in cyberspace may function as “silos” of the like-minded, rather participants in civic discourse. Cybermedia are markedly sites of youthful creative energy, but “the public interest” is not a primary topic of interest. While the public broadcasting audience is aging, it has been noticeably more interested in civic matters.

Even though there is abundant activity in cybermedia, it is important to be aware of who is not part of the discussion. Blogging, for example, is dominated by white males; citizen mobilizing projects like Moveon.org rarely reach across class and racial lines. This is not a simple matter of access, but speaks also to matters of cultural difference.

Public media that seek to incorporate new citizen media face tremendous challenges in actively promoting participation across class, race, and generations, to ensure inclusion and foster open civic dialogue.

Economic models and sustainability

Public media, a nonprofit activity functioning within privatized commercial culture, requires alternative sources of funding and the development of hybrid economic models that straddle commercial and non-commercial boundaries, foundation funding and government support decline. The search for nonprofit sector support has begun, but solid solutions have yet to emerge.

Public broadcasting funding is tied to problematic government appropriations, audience contributions, foundation support, and corporate underwriting. Public media initiatives continue to rely on university resources, foundation funding, and volunteer labor. There are those who call for taking a cue from commercial examples, such as Google advertising targeted to the needs and interests of users. Many digital media projects are seeking partnerships with corporations and are hoping to develop income streams from the sale of goods and services.

Technology

Technology can be an obstacle as well as an enabler. Problems of compatibility, accessibility, and ease of use are common. There is need for the development and widespread use of social software, wifi and user-friendly interfaces. It isn't simply a matter of technological capacity, but also accessibility and the purposes to which it is put. It is necessary to remember, too, that open technology tends to expand possibilities for the already privileged, who possess skills, resources, and familiarity that allow the exploration of new opportunities.

Common assumptions about the “natural” ability of young people to engage with new technologies are misleading. The ubiquity of text messaging, e-mail, and video games by young people doesn't automatically signal knowledge of technologies themselves, how media functions in our culture, or how to use digital technologies effectively for social expression. Videoblogging, for example, requires complex storytelling and filmmaking skills. Schools (K-

12 through high school), universities, and cable access centers may be effective providers of multi-media literacy training in the public schools and curriculum geared toward social problem solving and community building.

As communication across platforms and national borders grows more common, technological compatibility is a persistent problem. From downloading audio files to incorporating video and digital media from multiple sources, incompatible standards and regulatory practices present obstacles to free exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

The group concluded that in many different contexts *active shaping* of media environments is critical to public engagement, as is the *active participation* of members of the public. Linking all the suggestions together was the notion of *an active commitment to the cultivation of public life, through institutions and policies*. Some of the more specific conclusions:

- Emergent participatory digital technologies provide an outstanding opportunity to improve the quality of civic discourse. But “safe spaces” are critical, and moderation or curating is essential to safety.
- Face-to-face interaction is essential to public life, and is often critically facilitated, in a “two-step flow,” by electronic media and digital communication.
- Public broadcasting’s resources, relationships and public trust provide unique and irreplaceable resources during this transition. But pubcasters must seize the opportunities of a new open environment; the “push” model of mass media is seen by many younger people as patronizing.
- Public engagement is not supported by the corporate-provision model. Policies and practices that sustain public interest media are a fundamental need in democratic society. This does not have to mean only taxpayer support. It may mean exploring new relationships within the nonprofit sector, and analyzing techniques such as Google’s advertising model, which distance advertising from content.
- Technology doesn’t liberate democratic public behaviors and that open technology tends to expand the possibilities for the already privileged. There is therefore a need for practices to ensure inclusion across divides of race, class, and opinion.

NEXT STEPS

The group brought up a range of activities to act on these conclusions:

- Teaching/Training. Media literacy and skills training for K-12—as well as college students and the public—are necessary in a highly mediated culture, and should include nurturing habits of civic participation that carry into adulthood. Public access channels,

media arts centers, and higher education are other teaching sites. Teaching modules, toolkits, curriculum, and workshops can assist this project.

- Moderating and curating. The key role of moderating/curating to create a public media platform was a consistent theme. The knowledge already won about how to manage open and accessible platforms needs to be shared, especially among those just beginning to enter these open environments.
- Alliances. Building alliances within the nonprofit sector can maximize resources, expand outreach, promote information exchange among public media practitioners, and incubate projects in an emerging media environment. Crucially, they may provide alternative funding models. Possible paths include co-branding, partnerships, and aggregating content.
- Experiments. New digital channels are important sites for experiments in moderated public spaces.
- Research. Universities, think tanks, media arts centers and other sites that provide the opportunity for research and reflection can provide the intellectual scaffolding and research to support of public interest media.